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# The Settlement Stage: How Hull House Bridged Leisure, Creativity, and Play

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE SETTLEMENT STAGE:  
HOW HULL HOUSE BRIDGED LEISURE,  
CREATIVITY, AND PLAY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY  
ANN E. GOODSON  
CHICAGO, IL  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HULL HOUSE	1
Overview of Research	1
The Beginnings of Hull House	3
Hull House's Commitment to the Arts	8
Conclusion	10
CHAPTER TWO: A SYNTHESIS OF TWO THEORIES	12
A Hull House Pedagogy	12
Play Theory and Hull House	29
Significant Terminology	36
Conclusion	40
CHAPTER THREE: A TEMPLE OF SATIRE	41
"That Wonderful Spolin Way": A Brief History of The Second City	41
"We know we are standing on the shoulders of giants": Second City as a Historical Artifact	49
"What we are striving for is something that is to be reckoned with": A Distinct Brand of Social Satire	57
"There's a fearlessness to the work": The Role of Play	62
"There are satellites of this training everywhere": Second City's Continued Growth	68
Conclusion	69
APPENDIX A: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS	72
Brooke Breit	73
Norm Holly	89
Anne Libera	107
Bina Martin	129
Rachael Mason	146
REFERENCES	161
VITA	163

## ABSTRACT

Of the settlement house movement in the United States at the turn of the century, perhaps the most famous of these houses was Chicago's Hull House. Founded in a slum by Jane Addams, Hull House provided healthcare, education, recreation, and childcare services to recent European immigrants living in extreme poverty (Addams, 1990). While the impact of Addam's work at Hull House on modern sociology, education, social work, welfare and child labor laws have been well documented, less celebrated are the contributions made by the arts education programs at Hull House to modern creative dramatics.

This thesis examines the presence of arts education, particularly creative dramatics, in Chicago's Hull House from 1890-1940. I contend that at the turn of the century, the ideologies of recreation and play developed by Jane Addam's and Neva Boyd combined during their time together at Hull House to produce a new, pedagogical approach to arts education, synthesized in the work of Viola Spolin. The work of Boyd and Addams, further developed by Spolin, combined in Hull House to not only facilitate local community growth on Halsted Street and to provide services to the extreme poor, but to create an altogether new creative discipline and approach to education with significant and lasting historical ramifications.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF HULL HOUSE

In chapter one, I will provide an overview of the research which follows before briefly examining the history of Hull House, including the goals of the settlement, the conditions of Halsted Street during the settlement's founding, key players in the settlement's founding, the settlement's well-documented commitment to the arts, and the historical implications of the work done at the settlement.

#### **Overview of Research**

This thesis will contend that a direct link exists between the theatre education efforts of Hull House, directed by Viola Spolin and under the guidance of Jane Addams and Neva Boyd, and modern trends of improvisation and sketch exemplified by the work of Chicago's famed Second City Theatre. In the chapters that follow I will argue that Chicago's wildly popular, provocative Second City Theatre represents the direct result of Spolin's work at Hull House in the early 1900s.

The historical significance of Jane Addams' Hull House, and the contributions of the settlement to sociology, labor laws, child development, and education pedagogy have been well documented. While much scholarship exists examining the importance of the settlement as a whole, comparatively little exists which examines the significant arts education efforts offered by Hull House. Of this limited scholarship on arts education within the settlement, none directly examines the

historical correlation between the foundational work done by Viola Spolin at Hull House and the establishment of Chicago's Second City Theater in 1959.

Conversely, while most scholarship on Second City and modern improvisational theater credits Spolin and the improvisational games she developed while working at Hull House as providing some foundation for the later development of Second City, this credit is usually only a brief acknowledgement of her work. Overwhelmingly, books on improvisation, Second City, and drama fail to adequately credit Spolin's work for providing the entire theoretical foundation upon which Second City is built, choosing instead to focus on the contributions made by her son, Paul Sills. While Sills contributed a great deal to Second City's founding and his work should not be diminished, it is troublesome that his contributions so often overshadow the groundbreaking work of his mother.

It is my contention that students of both theatre and education are remiss to neglect the study of Viola Spolin's work at Hull House. Devoting consideration to the radical theatre of Viola Spolin provides a more nuanced understanding of both Second City and Hull House. Further, I argue that examining the historical connection between Hull House and Second City reveals that both are far more socially radical and provocative than typical schools of scholarly thought would suggest. In sum, by examining the historical line which may be drawn between Hull House and Second City, there is a great deal to be learned about both. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that Viola Spolin's work constitutes a synthesis of the ideologies of Neva Boyd and Jane Addams and a groundbreaking new ideology of recreational play. I contend that this new ideology of recreational play lead directly

to the founding of Second City nearly 50 years later, and that the type of theatre performed daily on the Second City stages represent a continuation of the work done at Hull House over a hundred years after the settlement's founding.

### **The Beginnings of Hull House**

In 1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Hull House in a slum on Chicago's Halsted Street (Dilberto, 1999). Addams, herself the unmarried daughter from an affluent family, felt compelled to establish a settlement house to provide assistance to Chicago's recent, European immigrants living in extreme poverty. Located in a neighborhood diverse in race, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and education level, Hull House quickly began responding to the unique and varied needs of the community (Lunbland, 1995). One of the first of what would become a large-scale settlement house movement in the United States, Addams modeled Hull House on London's Toynbee Hall. Addams intended to create Hull House in the image of Toynbee Hall in an effort to unite Chicago's poor classes under common citizenship (Dilberto, 1999).

When Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr took over the Hull Mansion on Chicago's Halsted Street in 1889, they were joining a desperately needy community (Addams, 1990; Dilberto, 1999; Tims, 1961). Addams and Starr disagreed with policy-makers of the day, believing that it was often injustice, rather than immorality, which could facilitate the spread of poverty (Dilberto, 1999). Addams and Starr quickly observed that what limited charity did exist was painfully inadequate for the needs of the deeply impoverished and ever-growing community of recent immigrants



living in the slums of Halsted Street. Addams (1990) recalls the early days of Hull

House grimly:

One of the first lessons we learned at Hull-House was that private beneficence is totally inadequate to deal with the vast numbers of the city's disinherited. We also quickly came to realize that there are certain types of wretchedness from which every private philanthropy shrinks and which are cared for only in those wards of the county hospital provided for the wrecks of vicious living or in the city's isolation hospital for smallpox patients. (p. 202)

In referring to the “wretchedness” of Halsted Street, Addams is identifying not just the disease—chief among them, smallpox—and poverty plaguing the community surrounding Hull House, but the ubiquity of prostitution, into which young girls were often lured. Indeed, Addams' Hull House was one of the only resources in the community willing to assist former sex workers (Addams, 1990). With no playground or safe, communal space in which to play, “children played around piles of rotting garbage and, occasionally, the bodies of horses that had collapsed while pulling carts loaded with junk or vegetables. Sometimes, to amuse themselves, the children fished for rats under the sidewalks,” (Dilberto, 1999, p. 151). So in need of resources and infrastructure was Chicago, Tims (1961) describes it as “a city of garbage and gangsters,” (p. 59).

It was in this desperate climate that Addams and Starr established Hull House, with very specific goals in mind for the settlement. Notably, Addams and Starr desired to live among the community surrounding Hull House, and to integrate themselves into the neighborhood as thoroughly as possible (Addams, 1990; Dilberto, 1999). Addams' goals for the settlement “aimed to do more than provide the poor with money and other assistance. Rather...Jane and Ellen [wanted] to have as much

personal contact as they could with the poor,” (Dilberto, 1999, p. 146). Hull House was decidedly the “opposite of traditional charity, which in Jane’s view emphasized the differences between rich and poor, thus widening the gap between them,” (Dilberto, 1990, p. 163). Bryan and Davis (1990) note that Hull House was no mere site for charitable giving, and that Addams and Starr “hoped to be neighbors to the poor, sharing with them their plight and working with them to improve the neighborhood,” (p. 5). Rather than simply providing financial and other resources to the community, or acting as religious ministers to the neighborhood, Addams and Starr aimed to live among the slum, and considered it their ethical responsibility to assist whenever a crisis arose (Addams, 1990; Dilberto, 1999).

This desire to belong, to the extent possible, to the community she served was consistent with Addams’ belief that personal action is the only means to ensure social development and progress. She maintained that “the sole medium for the expression for ethics...was *action*,” (Tims, 1961). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was at first challenging for Addams and Starr, two white, English-speaking women from relatively affluent families, to interact meaningfully with their new neighbors (Addams, 1990; Bryan & Davis, 1990). This cultural divide was likely exacerbated by Addams’ desire, despite living humbly, to make the settlement house a source of beauty within the otherwise dilapidated slum housing. Bryan and Davis (1990) describe this cultural disconnect concisely: “One of [Addams’ and Starr’s] primary tasks, they believed, was to bring an appreciation of beauty and great art to those forced to live in the drab and unattractive slum. Of the early activities at Hull-House,

much was esoteric, even patronizing, but the founders were flexible and willing to change,” (p. 6).

Notably, Addams and Starr devoted their attention first to the needs of children, and within a week of Hull House’s existence they established a kindergarten (Tims, 1961). The settlement then expanded its services, offering a series of recreational and educational classes, in the attempt to make basic education and training available for all people living in the neighborhood (Bryan & Davis, 1969). These classes, ranging from literature clubs, to courses in English literacy, to job preparation, were incredibly popular with adults and children in the neighborhood. The number of clubs and recreational classes offered at Hull House grew dramatically during the early life of the settlement, with classes often being segregated to accommodate language differences between community members (Dilberto, 1999).

Despite being founded on the Christian principles of providing assistance to people living in extreme poverty, providing immediate health and housing services was not the only purpose of Hull House. Though not explicitly articulated as a purpose of the settlement, several historians have remarked on settlement house’s role in helping immigrants, particularly immigrant children, to assimilate to American culture and behavior (Mintz, 2004). Despite her deep respect for the cultural diversity of the immigrants she served, and being committed to using Hull House to promote inter-cultural understanding and peace, Addams herself noted that she perceived speedy cultural assimilation as the most effective means of ensuring a recent immigrant’s success in America (Dilberto, 1999). Suggestions of this assimilative practice are likewise apparent in Addam’s rationale for founding Hull

House. Namely, Addams considered three desires as primarily motivating the settlement movement: “the desire to add the ‘social function’ to political democracy; secondly, to assist in the general *progress* of the race; and thirdly, as an expression of Christianity through humanitarian activity,” [emphasis added] (Tims, 1961). While not expressly describing the desire to assimilate immigrants, Addams’s use of the term “progress” suggests assimilative desires. Despite the tendency toward assimilation, Addams and Hull House remained committed to encouraging cultural diversity and inter-cultural respect. Addams considered Hull House—in which often-affluent settlement workers interacted directly and intimately with the people they served—the opposite of “traditional charity,” or monetary donations, which she perceived as widening the social gap between the wealthy and impoverished (Dilberto, 1999).

In addition to meeting the immediate needs of the urban poor, the mission of Hull House was representative of the larger, transformative goals of the settlement house movement. Addams believed settlement houses to be a means of promoting inter-cultural understanding, thus uniting diverse populations as one cohesive citizenry, which she felt could be applied to urban environments throughout the country. At its peak, 70 individuals lived at Hull House, and over 2,000 people were served, in some manner, by the house daily, suggesting that Addams, at least in part, met her goals of serving large populations of the community. Addams, through her work at Hull House, is credited with establishing America’s modern welfare state, assisting with the establishment of workers’ unions, encouraging the passage of child labor laws, and advocating that children not be tried as adults for minor crimes, further illustrating the lasting effects of the settlement (Lunbland, 1995).

### **Hull House's Commitment to the Arts**

In addition to providing services to meet the immediate needs of those living in poverty, Hull House, through its recreational clubs and classes, demonstrated a clear commitment to the arts, particularly creative dramatics and folk dance. The first two additions to the building itself were, in fact, an art gallery followed by a theater (Tims, 1961). Though a formal rehearsal space for dramatic activity was not established until 1893 (Jackson, 2001), theatre at Hull House can be traced back to 1890, just a year after the settlement's founding, with the study of Shakespeare's plays in a club directed by Ellen Gates Starr (Bryan & Davis, 1969). As the popularity and number of clubs at Hull House grew, dramatics and the study of plays was one of many activities including dance, lectures, social events and various classes offered at the settlement. By 1893 a gymnasium had been added to the settlement, which club members quickly claimed for theatrical activities and study, having spent the years prior competing with other clubs for space within the settlement (Jackson, 2001).

In 1898, Edith de Nancrede, a former actress who would become the director of Hull House theatre until her death in 1937 (Bryan & Davis, 1969), was accepted as a resident, further developing and legitimizing theatre at the settlement (Jackson, 2001). One year after her arrival, the Hull House theatre building was constructed (Bryan & Davis, 1969), as a response both to the growing interest among children and adults in drama, as well as the overwhelming number of clubs and organizations already competing for meeting space within the house (Bryan & Davis, 1969). The year after, in 1900, what would become the Hull House Players was established as the

Hull House Dramatic Association, directed by Laura Dainty Pelham, another former actress who, with de Nancrede, would direct the majority of the theatrical productions at Hull House (Bryan & Davis, 1969). Jane Addams's commitment to using Hull House activities as a means of encouraging cultural diversity and strengthening community bonds, coupled with the presence of Pelham and Nancrede, both trained actresses, resulted in children and adults producing community theatre of a very high quality at Hull House. Most notable among these early productions was a 1903 production in which Greek immigrants performed Sophocles' *Ajax* in their native language, along with several other Greek plays (Bryan & Davis, 1969). Addams recognized the cultural significance of the production, noting that the Greeks living around Hull House "often feel that their history and classic background are completely ignored by Americans, and that they are easily confused with the more [sic] ignorant immigrants from other parts of southeastern Europe" (Addams, 1990, p. 254).

Notably, the Hull House Players quickly earned a reputation for producing near-professional quality theatre productions, gaining the recognition of various local newspapers. Despite being entirely comprised of individuals with little or no experience in theatre, dramatics at Hull House reached such a level of quality in practice that the settlement is credited with establishing the first little theatre in the United States (Dieser, 2005). In addition to drama being incredibly popular among those living near Hull House (Addams, 1990), the Hull House players' reputation for professionalism and commitment to their work quickly spread beyond the settlement neighborhood. A 1913 newspaper, when describing the Hull House Player's trip to

Dublin to perform several original and classic plays—during which the group dined with Lady Gregory and visited with the famed Irish Players (Bryan & Davis, 1969)-- summed up the professional quality of the group simply: “The Hull-House Players are not amateurs. They act with a finish and artistic precision, which, as one Chicago critic said, inflicts on them the penalty as well as the privilege of being considered professionals,” (Weil, 1913, as cited in Bryan and Davis, 1969, p. 93).

In addition to the settlement’s commitment to producing theatre of a very high quality, Jane Addams was equally compelled by what she perceived as the reformatory power of the dramatic arts. Seemingly contradictorily, Addams at the same time articulated both a desire to use theatre as a vehicle for celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity at Hull House, and as an “Agent of Americanization,” (Bryan & Davis, 1969). Further, Addams believed theatre to be a means of unifying those living near the settlement house in a common purpose, thus providing “an environmental medium for cross-class and cross-cultural expansion,” (Jackson, 2001). Addams was equally compelled by the communal nature of theatre, particularly in its effects on the development of young people (Addams, 1990). Addams’ support and promotion of the arts made her especially loved by the amateur actors and actresses who played on the settlement stage, so much so that when Addam’s body lay in state at Hull House May 22 to 23, 1935, an honor guard comprised of Hull House Dramatic Association members stood by (Tims, 1961).

### **Conclusion**

The United States settlement house movement, particularly Jane Addam’s Hull House in Chicago, has been credited with establishing foundational principles of

the practice of education, childcare, sociology, social work, welfare, and services to people living in poverty. While these practices have had lasting historical implications, much less studied are the unique contributions Hull House made to modern theatre and theatre education, which will be examined in the chapters that follow.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A SYNTHESIS OF TWO THEORIES

In Chapter Two I will contend that Viola Spolin's ideology of improvisation, or recreational, dramatic play, constitutes a synthesis of Jane Addams's theory of recreation and Neva Boyd's theory of play. I will analyze the means through which Spolin synthesized the ideologies of Boyd and Addams, and the ways in which her ideology of improvisation and creative dramatics, which she first developed and implemented at Hull House, reflect the ideologies of Boyd and Addams.

#### **A Hull House Pedagogy**

In addition to its fervent support of the arts, Hull House, and the individuals working and living there, participated in the development of a unique theory of leisure and recreation. In particular, Hull House paid special attention to the influence of play—creative or strictly recreational—on those using the settlement, namely children. The result was pedagogy specific to Hull House, which was deeply sensitive to the interconnected relationships of recreational play and intellectual and social development. To best understand the interconnected nature of the three ideologies at play at Hull House, it is helpful to examine Jane Addams's theory of recreation, Neva Boyd's theory of play, and Viola Spolin's theory of recreational play, or improvisation.

Jane Addams founded Hull House as a manifestation of her well-defined ideology of social recreation as a means to facilitate social progress. This ideology is as unique to Addams as it was well articulated in her many writings during the course of her career. She frequently articulated a desire to cultivate a sense of community within the slum, in which neighbors would engage in meaningful social relationships, to the ultimate benefit of everyone. She expressed a longing “for the comfort of a definite social creed, which should afford at one and the same time an explanation of the social chaos and the logical steps towards its better ordering,” (Addams, 1990, p. 125). She envisioned Hull House itself as functioning within this larger social bond, describing among the settlement’s duties that of bearing “its share of the neighborhood burden imposed by poverty,” (Addams, 1990, p. 104). Addams (1990) viewed instances of individuals helping one another within a community as the ultimate manifestation of this social bond, and was especially impressed when she observed it:

I became permanently impressed with the kindness of the poor to each other; the woman who lives upstairs will willingly share her breakfast with the family below because she knows they ‘are hard up’; the man who boarded with them last winter will give a month’s rent because he knows the father of the family is out of work...there are also families who, during times of business depression, are obliged to seek help from the country or some benevolent society, but who are themselves most anxious not to be confounded with the pauper class. (Addams, 1990, p. 110)

More important than operating purely within the settlement, Addams believed that social recreation, as facilitated by a settlement house, was crucial to the overall social progress of the society at large. She viewed “the creation of a world

consciousness [as the] unique contribution of [her generation] time to human evolution,” (Tims, 1961, p. 11). Further, Addams (1990) believed that even in conditions as poor as those surrounding Hull House, such a social commitment could be developed through meaningful recreation: “We fatuously hoped that we might pluck from the human tragedy itself a consciousness of a common destiny which should bring its own healing, that we might extract from life’s very misfortunes a power of cooperation which should be effective against them,” (p. 91).

Further, Addams observed within the community surrounding Hull House a need for a space for meaningful recreation. She describes those in the neighborhood, particularly young people, as desperate for even the simplest recreational programs. In describing the rapid growth of social clubs at the settlement (initially almost entirely for English-speakers due to staff language limitations), she notes, “so eager were [community members] for social life that no mistakes in management could drive them away,” (Addams, 1990, p. 222). She echoes this sentiment when reflecting on the growth the settlement—and the growth of the social and recreational clubs which met within the settlement—over the years:

In addition to these rising young people given to debate and dramatics, and to the members of the public school alumni associations which meet in our rooms, there are hundreds of others who for years have come to Hull-House frankly in search of that pleasure *and recreation* which all young things crave and which those who have spent long hours in a factory or shop demand as a right. (Addams, 1990, p. 225, emphasis added)

Also consistent with Addams’ ideology of social recreation is the distinct effort at Hull House to unify diverse populations within the community. Addams took as a source of pride that neighbors widely diverse in language, race, ethnicity,

and political beliefs, could unify within the settlement through mutual, social experience (Addams, 1990). In most instances this social recreation took the form of various social clubs and organizations which met within the settlement, which, for many of the recent immigrants utilizing Hull House, served as their first experience with democratic practice in action (Tims, 1961). Addams considered the meaningful, peaceful interaction of diverse populations, as facilitated by social recreation, a critical element in the development of a healthy, urban society. Addams (1990) describes her attempts to articulate this principal of urban living to the recent immigrants utilizing the settlement, many of whom had previously lived in rural environments:

We had also arranged many talks for the immigrants, pointing out that although a woman may sweep her own doorway in her native village and allow the refuse to innocently decay in the open air and sunshine, in a crowded city quarter, if the garbage is not properly collected and destroyed, a tenement-house mother may see her children sicken and die, and that the immigrants must therefor, not only keep their own houses clean, but must also help the authorities to keep the city clean. (p. 185-186)

In addition to being concerned about providing opportunities for recreation to engage diverse populations in peaceful interactions, Addams was particularly compelled by the lack of recreational space and activities for young people. She describes in particular her concern for the young people in the slum falling victim to petty crime, alcohol use, inactivity, and gangs. She stresses the “need for civic cooperation... in many directions, but none more strikingly than in that organized effort which must be carried on unceasingly if young people are to be protected from the darker and coarser dangers of the city,” (Addams, 1990, p. 210). Addams herself

took issue with the prevailing adult mentality that young people were voluntarily choosing inactivity at a time in their development when they were “most anxious to construct the world anew,” (Tims, 1961, p. 39). She took issue with the number of young people drawn into inactivity due to a lack of recreational and social opportunities, and sought to use Hull House to correct this deficit (Addams, 1990; Tims, 1961). Interestingly, in her use of social activities as a means to occupy the time of young people in a constructive rather than destructive manner, Addams was invoking gendered rhetoric of exhausting young people as a means of discouraging poor behavior. Jackson (2001) argues that this rhetoric was utilized to make the public focus on the gendered perception that adolescent males are inherently dangerous if left idle, as a means to distract the public from the then-radical behavior of the women running the settlement.

Also significant to Addams’ ideology of recreation was her perception of theatre as a form of recreation. Addams (1990) describes theatre as “the one agency which freed boys and girls from that destructive isolation of those who drag themselves up to maturity by themselves [giving them] a glimpse of that order and beauty into which even the poorest drama endeavors to restore the bewildering facts of life,” (p. 248-249). Here Addams is articulating not only the beneficial potential of drama as a means of occupying the time of youths, but as an activity which engages young people in meaningful social activity which aids in their overall maturation. Drama programs were quickly established at the settlement, and Addams (1990) remarked on what she perceived as the beneficial influence of the presence of the arts

within the community as a means of preserving the cultural heritage of participants: “The immigrants in the neighborhood of Hull-House have utilized our little stage in an endeavor to reproduce the past of their own nations through those immortal dramas which have escaped from the restraining bond of one country into the land of the universal,” (p. 250).

In her establishment of Hull House, Addams sought to create a “cathedral of humanity,” (Tims, 1961, p. 54) with the goal of “restoring the idea of a neighborhood to a crowded section of the city,” (Bryan & Davis, 1990, p. 9). This settlement was not just a resource for the community, but a manifestation of Addams’ distinct ideology of recreation as a means to engage diverse populations in meaningful social interaction which would ultimately benefit society at large. This ideology was solidified and evident in many settlement activities by the time an established social worker, Neva Boyd, arrived at Hull House.

### **Neva Boyd’s Theory of Play**

The development of Hull House’s unique pedagogy of play was the direct result of the work of Neva Boyd, whose theorizing about play and child development proved deeply formative to Hull House’s theory of recreational and community service. A teacher and social worker, Boyd founded the Training School for Playground Workers in 1911, where she trained adults in the importance of encouraging meaningful play for children (Boyd, 1971). Interestingly, Addams, the founder of the settlement, was also deeply committed to play, and served as the first vice president of the Playground Association of America after its founding in 1906

(Knight, 2010). In 1920, Boyd brought her work to Hull House, by founding the Recreational Training School, which instructed adults—mostly young, white women—in working at a settlement (Spolin, 1963). Though both women were involved in the playground movement, no records exist which would suggest that they had met before Boyd joined Hull House.

Boyd's ideology of play was distinctly non-competitive and social in nature, making it a cohesive fit with Addams's ideals of social, peaceful recreation. Considering play the core task of childhood, Boyd (1971) defined play "not only as [action] expressed by children in games and youth in sports, but as basically humanistic and cultural in the broadest sense. If play is thought of as compatible to the irradiance of a brilliant jewel it will be given a truer interpretation than were a definition attempted," (p. 79). She described play as a "form of behavior native to [sic] man," (Boyd, 1971, p. 81). One of the first to theorize on the cognitive significance of play, Boyd (1971) was particularly compelled by the transformative potential of play:

While play is of great value in institutions concerned with the treatment of problem and anti-social behavior, or deviant behavior, it is also a value in bringing about behavior change in all children, youth and adults afflicted with personality problems. Play, particularly the playing of organized games, has proven to be a dynamic process at once correctional, disciplinary, and developmental. Since all true play is extroversive it involves expressive behavior in the players and therefore tends to prevent or remove blockages and in one process provides a counterpart of the blockage. (p. 97)

It is not insignificant that Boyd was joining a settlement house already deeply compelled by the significance of creative and recreational play. In 1892 the first playground in Chicago was built at Hull House, after aggressive lobbying by Addams

and other settlement workers (Boyd, 1971; Dilberto, 1999; Drinko, 2013; Jackson, 2001; Tims, 1961). Here, Addams demonstrated a sensitivity to the needs and desires of the neighborhood; indeed, the community surrounding Hull House was so in need of safe, recreational space, that the night before the playground's official opening, neighborhood children dug underneath the surrounding fence to play on the newly-erected structure (Dilberto, 1999). Even Boyd (1971) herself would comment later on the extreme attention paid to the fine arts in the settlement, remarking "It was in the early settlements, not in the schools, that cultural activities such as the arts, drama, music, etc., were experimentally promoted often by gifted professional men and women who in general served without monetary compensation," (p. 78).

Boyd's ideology of play, when introduced to Addams's philosophy of recreation as a tool for uniting diverse populations in a unified democratic community, was further cultivated at Hull House. Most notably, Boyd took issue with the emphasis that most recreational programs throughout the country placed on formalized competition, typically through sports activities, believing instead that play should be a creative interaction between equals, wherein there is no correct or incorrect way to play (Boyd, 1971). Boyd (1971) recognized the ability of non-competitive play to provide a form of "social education" (p. 9) to children, even children with disabilities or socio-emotional disorders (p. 38). When reflecting specifically on the relationship between a child's participation in game playing and the development of empathy, Boyd noted, "Perhaps no other form of human behavior is so readily evoked in childhood as play and seemingly none offers a heritage so rich



in variety of overly expressive activities conducive to the activation of aesthetic sentiment and imagination as does play. (In which the understanding of self and others is incidental.)” (Boyd, “Drama and Empathy,” Box 3 Folder 48, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago). Notably, Boyd demonstrated a dedication not just to non-competitive play, but to artistic and dramatic activity, noting that she considered the arts essential in providing expression to community life (Boyd, 1971).

During her time at Hull House, Boyd continued her theorizing on play by putting into practice a series of games in which children were encouraged to work collectively and non-competitively toward a common goal (Drinko, 2013; Boyd “Play – Spontaneity,” Box 9 Folder 164, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago). By participating in these loosely structured, self-directed games, Boyd contended that children were becoming aware of their ability to influence others, and, thus, developing empathy (Boyd “Dramatics – Undated,” Box 3 Folder 48, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago). Further, likely because of the settlement’s commitment to theatre, Boyd began to speculate on the connection between dramatic activity and game playing. In an undated essay, Boyd articulated this connection between creative dramatics and recreational games: “In [the game and drama] the players accept the challenge of solving the problem and this results in the psychological imaginative immersion of all the participants in the game or the drama, and of the individual in his role as well, so

completely as to take others with him responsively,” (Box 9 Folder 148, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago).

Evidence suggests that Addams, too, was aware of the significant relationship between creative dramatics and Boyd’s conception of game playing. Notably, Addams used the word *game* interchangeably in reference to both theatre and non-dramatic recreational activities, a practice indicative of her understandings of the relationship between Boyd’s theories of game playing and the culture of dramatic activity present at the settlement (Jackson, 2001). Also significant was the importance that Addams and Boyd both placed on leisure time. Notably, both women remarked on the danger posed by leisure time when individuals lack a meaningful, healthy manner in which to occupy such time (Boyd, “Delinquency, Undated,” Box 3 Folder 38, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago; Dieser, 2005). This, coupled with Boyd’s advocacy for the arts, which proved consistent with that of the settlement as a whole (Boyd “Dramatics, Undated,” Box 3 Folder 48, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago) made Hull House an environment uniquely conducive to the work of Boyd and Addams to develop and meld into what is arguably an entirely new ideology.

The use of educational, non-competitive game playing alongside dramatic play constituted a significant pedagogical development unique to Hull House. As the settlement “more expansively [defined] performance through its modes of embodiment, [sic] orality, and its status as a public event, activities on the playground, the gymnasium’s social dances or...receptions could also be positioned

in alternative theatrical genealogies,” making Hull House’s contributions not only significant to education, but also to the practice of theatre (Jackson, 2001, p. 213).

### **Viola Spolin’s Theory of Recreational Play**

Jane Addams and Neva Boyd worked at Hull House simultaneously for a period of about seven years, until Addams’ death in 1935. During this time their unique, individual ideologies of recreation, games and leisure activity would be combined through settlement organizations and clubs. It was not until the years following Addam’s death, however, that these two ideologies would be meaningfully, thoroughly synthesized through the work of an actress and teacher named Viola Spolin.

Considered the grandmother of modern dramatic improvisation and credited with the establishment of innumerable principles of modern dramatic performance, Spolin was a Chicago actress and teacher (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008). In 1924, Spolin arrived at Hull House as a student of Neva Boyd’s Recreation Training School, at which she would remain until 1927 (Boyd, Box 1 Folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago; Drinko, 2013; Spolin, 1963). As a student of Boyd’s training school, and being privy to the development of Boyd’s games in both theory and in practice, Spolin began to reconcile the leisure and game pedagogy at Hull House with her own training in theatre. During her time at Hull House, Spolin began experimenting with utilizing Boyd’s principles of game-playing with improvisational dramatics, essentially

beginning to put into practice the connection between the game and drama, which Boyd and Addams had recognized but not yet acted upon.

The influence of Boyd on the work of her student—indeed, even the work Spolin continued after leaving Hull House—is apparent in much of Spolin’s later writing. Tellingly, Spolin (1963) repeatedly describes the importance of “the game” in dramatic work, describing games as being able to “bring out self [within the player] rather than ego,” (p. xiii) and repeatedly asking, in her evaluation of theatre, “were [the actors] acting? Get them to play” (p. xiii) and “when [the performance] bogs down, *play a game*” (p. xiii, emphasis added). Sweet (1978) articulates Spolin’s use of Boyd’s ideology concisely:

Spolin had developed a unique approach to the theater, deeply influenced by her training as a recreational director under Neva Boyd...At the heart of Boyd’s work was an awareness of the constructive potential of play...Spolin’s contribution was to create new games designed to encourage creativity, making play the catalyst for self-expression and self-realization. (p. xvii)

During the period from 1927 until 1935, Spolin temporarily retired to raise her two sons (Spolin, “Curriculum Vitae, April 21, 1965,” Box 2 Folder, Special Collections, Northwestern University). When she returned to education in 1935—the same year as Jane Addams’s death—she was once again drawn to Hull House, where she established the Children’s Creative Theatre at the settlement as an employee of the Works Progress Administration Recreation Department (Spolin, “Notes, Undated,” Box 2 Folder 18, Special Collections, Northwestern University). Drawing on the teaching of Boyd—who had, by that time, become a faculty member of Northwestern University’s sociology department--Spolin was committed to using the

Children's Creative Theatre program as a means to engage students in cooperative, non-competitive dramatic activity (Spolin, 1963). Interestingly, it is unclear whether Boyd still worked at Hull House in a formal capacity during this time; her position at Northwestern was part-time, so it is possible that she continued working at the settlement in some capacity, though no records indicate her formal professional presence. Regardless, based on the friendly nature of her relationship with Spolin, it is likely that the two were still in correspondence with one another at this time.

Notably, Spolin's papers from this period reflect an interest in "teaching without over-intellectualizing," or excessive routine, and stressing the importance of meaningful group work (Spolin, "Notes, Undated," Box 2 Folder 18, Special Collections, Northwestern University). Spolin was also keenly aware of the significance of leisure and recreational time, echoing the concerns of Jane Addams, later noting of her time with the Children's Creative Theatre: "I used the method of improvisation with the children—keeping it as nearly as possible to a good recreation form. Theatre terms...are never used and yet through this recreational way of working, the children have become competent young actors without terms," (Spolin, "Notes, Undated," Box 2 Folder 18, Special Collections, Northwestern University).

Spolin believed in the ability of dramatic games to engage children and adults in organic, social play highly conducive to producing theatrical performances of a high quality (Spolin, 1963). These principles of non-competitiveness, an emphasis on group work and the ideology that students be allowed to work collaboratively without seeking a *correct* or *incorrect* answer are consistent with the teachings of Boyd.

Further, Spolin's desire to engage students in organic dramatic behavior deriving from emotional honesty and inter-personal relationships rather than the over-intellectualization of dramatic principles would suggest that Spolin was not just repeating the ideology of Boyd or Addams during this time period, but was using the Children's Creative Theatre to synthesize the work of both women into a new, unique means of teaching.

Building on the tradition of near-professional quality theatre being produced by Hull House, the Children's Creative Theatre, under the direction of Spolin, soon developed a reputation for producing exceptional work, which rivaled that of adult performers. In addition to the overwhelming community support of Hull House theatre, the group gained repeated praise from several newspapers, including the *Chicago Sunday Times* and the *Chicago Daily News* (Spolin, "WPA Recreational Project: articles (annotated), 1939-1940," Box 1 Folder 5, Special Collections, Northwestern University). Spolin's personal and professional documents from this time further reflect her commitment to the ideals originally advocated by Boyd and Addams. A 1938 Works Progress Administration Memorandum, penned by Spolin, describes several potential slogans to be used on promotional materials for her dramatic activities. Of these, several are indicative of Spolin's commitment to continuing the ideology of Boyd and Addams, including "Creative recreation gives new exciting experiences without moral hazards," "Developing self-reliance and independence through play," "Teach emotional security through proper recreation,"

and “Creative recreation satisfies human wishes,” (Spolin, “WPA Recreational Project: field visit reports, 1938,” Box 1 Folder 3, Special Collections, Northwestern University).

In 1939, having further developed her theory of dramatic game playing as meaningful, educational recreation, Spolin became Supervisor of the Works Progress Administration Recreation department. For the next two years she would continue her work teaching theatre to children and laypeople, and overseeing various other recreation programs throughout Chicago. In later years, Spolin would remark on the significance of Boyd’s training during this period of her life, referring to Boyd as “A woman fifty years ahead of her time,” (Spolin, “Writings, 1948,” Box 1 Folder 12, Special Collections, Northwestern University) and even dedicating her book *Improvisation for the Theatre*, wherein she outlines the hundreds of dramatic games she developed while at Hull House and as supervisor for the Works Progress Administration, to her son Paul Sills and Neva Boyd (Spolin, 1963). Spolin credited Boyd for helping her students recognize that all individuals can benefit from dramatic play, including people with disabilities, the illiterate, people living in extreme poverty, and people with limited English proficiency (Spolin, “Writings, 1948,” Box 1 Folder 12, Special Collections, Northwestern University). Though not expressly articulated by Spolin, an ideological approach to theatre so welcoming of diversity seems consistent not only with Boyd’s teachings, but with Jane Addams’s philosophy of settlement houses as a whole, further illustrating Spolin’s work as a synthesis of that of Addams and Boyd.

This synthesis is likewise apparent in others' observations of Spolin's work as supervisor for the Works Progress Administration. A field supervisor's memorandum to the Works Progress Administration detailing his observation of one of Spolin's drama groups at Hull House makes frequent mention of the cooperative learning and collaborative engagement facilitated throughout the rehearsal. He notes in particular, "I should like to express my appreciation to Mrs. Spolin for the wonderful work she is doing. She is admired and respected by both students and leaders alike. The technique she employs is noteworthy for its informality...the group works because they love to cooperate—isn't this the goal we are seeking?" (Spolin, "WPA Recreational Project: field visit reports, 1938," Box 1 Folder 3, Special Collections, Northwestern University).

Also indicative of her training by Boyd, directly, and by Hull House and Jane Addams, somewhat indirectly, is Spolin's keen awareness of the influence of poverty on individuals' social and creative behavior. Reflecting in 1939 her personal notes, Spolin notes, "There became evident (to me) by my work in settlement houses a waste as fearsome, as terrible as that wrought physically by slums. This was the great creative waste (of vast numbers of boys and girls.) of men and women. Poverty, [sic] superstition does not only take its toll in physical life but it also stunts creative growth in the individual so that he indeed becomes the beast in the jungle struggling for survival!" (Spolin, "Hull House Theatre program, 1940," Box 1 Folder 6, Special Collections, Northwestern University). By appealing to the importance of leisure, the social significance of non-competitive play, and the creative growth achieved through



collaborative dramatic exercise, Spolin was not only meaningfully integrating the work of Boyd and Addams into an entirely new educational practice.

### **Historical Significance**

Spolin's work in synthesizing the work of Addams and Boyd proved not only to produce a unique pedagogical approach to recreation, leisure and the arts, but the work she began in Chicago had had lasting historical ramifications. The historical influence of Spolin's work is perhaps best illustrated in modern dramatics. The work of Spolin, initiated by her education at Hull House, has been credited with providing the foundation for modern improvisation, sketch-based theatre, and many forms of social satire. Spolin and her son, Paul Sills, worked collaboratively to continue developing her theory of dramatic games and improvisation. This work led to Sills' founding of the Compass Players at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. Under the guidance of his mother, Sills, along with several members of the Compass Players, later founded Chicago's famed Second City theatre in 1959 (Drinko, 2013; Spolin, 1963). Spolin's theatre games are likewise credited with providing the foundation for the Groundlings theatre school in Los Angeles, the work of Del Close in Chicago improvisation, and even the establishment of *Saturday Night Live*.

The suggestion of these future theatre institutions can be seen in Spolin's writing as far back as 1939, as she describes her practice of directing students to improvise scenes, then choose the best or most favored scenes to rehearse and perform in a semi-scripted manner—the practice still used by performers at Second City (Spolin, "Curriculum Vitae, April 21, 1965," Box 2 Folder 3, Special

Collections, Northwestern University). Even the now ubiquitous practice of improvisers taking a suggestion from the audience to initiate the improvised performance was first established by Spolin at her time at Hull House (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008). Additionally, theatre at Hull House was significant to the larger Little Theatre movement, as the settlement was the first of such theatres in the United States (Jackson, 2001).

### **Play Theory and Hull House**

While theorization about play is a well established historical practice, the play theory put into practice at Hull House which links social recreation to societal improvement, the betterment of the status of disenfranchised populations, and the reliance on creative dramatics as one means of achieving social, recreational play, is distinctly unique. To best understand the contributions made by Addams, Boyd, and Spolin, it is helpful to consider the manner in which their work intersects with both modern and historical play theory. Within this analysis, it is appropriate to analyze traditional definitions of play, the correlation between play and the dramatic arts, and significant terms used, and at times re-appropriated, in the discussion of both drama and play.

### **Defining Play**

The earliest definitions conceive play as an unimportant, even destructive characteristic of children which was to be discouraged as early as possible. Play behaviors were defined as “aimless, frivolous, and seemingly barren of any useful results...it was thought that play was a *necessary evil* of childhood—something that

had to be undergone in similar fashion to measles and mumps,” (Mitchell, 1939, p. 87, emphasis added). Often, this dismissive treatment of play was grounded in religious belief. The Puritans of the early 1600s saw first within all children the potential for sin, and sought to discourage crawling—which they considered animalistic—and other childish behavior in an attempt to turn children into adults as quickly as possible. While early humanists viewed children as being born without inherent sin, Puritans’ treatment of childhood and play represented the prevailing ideology of the time (Mintz, 2004).

The 1800s ushered in a new era in the conceptualization of childhood play. Rather than viewing play behaviors as deviant, theorists positioned play as “the very stuff of childhood, and that the period of childhood (or immaturity) existed in order that an organism may play,” (Pepler, 1982, pp. 8-9). Children of upper-class families were not expected to work, and the mass-production of children’s toys was commonplace (Mintz, 2004). At this time, what are now considered the classical theories of childhood and play were beginning to take root. In particular, play was theorized using three theories; *Surplus energy*, *the practice*, and *the recapitulation* theories (Pepler, 1982). The surplus energy theory speculated that play was a means of exerting the excessive energy of childhood, whereas the practice theory positioned play as essential in the evolutionary development of children, and the recapitulation theory suggested that “during childhood play, the history of humankind could be progressively recapitulated...childhood games which involved running, throwing, and club hitting (baseball) were viewed as modern extensions of earlier racial hunting

activities,” (Pepler, 1982, p. 10). Though these theories of play may have at times contradicted one another, tis emphasis on the importance of childhood play underscored a larger, cultural shift in the theorization of play behavior from frivolous to deeply developmentally significant (Mintz, 2004; Mitchell & Mason, 1939; Pepler, 1982).

These theories can be observed to varying degrees in the work done by Addams, Boyd, and Spolin at Hull House. Most notably, in her ideology of providing recreational activities for young people in an attempt to occupy their time constructively rather than destructively, Addams was invoking the surplus energy theory of play (Addams, 1990). Further, Addams, Boyd, and Spolin each demonstrated a passionate commitment to play as an essential element of childhood, which suggests they subscribed, if not knowingly, to the practice theory of play behavior (Addams, 1990; Boyd, 1971; Spolin, 1963; Sweet, 1978).

During this time, in addition to speculating about the developmental role of play, theorists were likewise examining the types of play behavior in which children could engage. Mitchell & Mason (1939) identify three types of play activity, *motor*, *sensory* and *intellectual*, wherein, “Motor play may be illustrated by running, jumping, climbing, or throwing; sensory play by watching a gymnastic exhibition, a game, or a movie show; intellectual play by listening to an interesting lecture, taking part in a debate, or playing cards,” (p. 101). Interestingly, though never expressly articulated within the text, it could be argued that the type of theatre which occurred at Hull House—wherein participants portrayed characters through physical

manipulations of their body or dance, watched critically the performance of their peers during improvisation so that they could participate in the fiction being created onstage, and thought critically about their own experiences and world events when creating new dramatic texts through improvisation and game-playing—represented a manifestation of all three of these types of play (Spolin, 1963; Sweet, 1978).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brian Sutton-Smith would build upon this theorization of play, providing his conceptualization of the *seven rhetorics* of play. These rhetorics represent the manner in which play has often been theorized. Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies the rhetorics of play as progress, play as fate, play as power, play as identity, play as the imaginary, play as a rhetoric of the self, play as frivolous—as exemplified by Puritan beliefs. Among these, the rhetoric of play as the imaginary is most clearly observed in the creative and dramatic work done at Hull House. Interestingly, Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to this rhetoric as being “applied to playful improvisation of all kinds in literature and elsewhere [idealizing] the imagination, flexibility, and creativity of the animal and human play worlds,” (p. 11). Here, his use of the word “improvisation” is noteworthy, as it exists as a term for both childhood play (improvising play scenarios) and a distinct theatre practice (improvising dramatic scenarios onstage without a script) developed by Viola Spolin ((Drinko, 2013; Spolin, 1963; Sweet, 1978).

Sutton-Smith (1976) would likewise argue that the collection of behaviors, games, songs, dances, and creative actions of children which facilitate play constitute a larger phenomenon, which he labels *childlore*. He notes, “the word ‘lore’ seems to

fit both the commonality, [sic] thematism, and the [sic] nonseriousness of these [play] phenomena most adequately, though it is obviously not a perfect fit,” (Sutton-Smith, 1976, p. 1). Interestingly, he again invokes dramatic imagery in his discussion of childlore, describing “dramatizations” (p. 1) as one of the play behaviors included therein (Sutton-Smith, 1976).

Also significant in the theorization of play is the assertion that childhood play has a distinct impact on cognitive development. Specifically, theorists have positioned play both as a site of cultural definition and creation by children (Mintz, 2004; Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn & Almy, 1987; Pellegrini, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1972). Pellegrini (1995) argued, “Cultural innovation may take place in play, a behavior pattern or context usually attributed to the young, leading to consequent information distribution,” (p. 47) going on to argue that play “may be a fertile ground for the creation of culture,” (p. 48). For example, Mintz (2004) argues that by participating in play, American child slaves were able to reenact the events surrounding them—slave auctions and the abuse of slaves, for example—as a means of better understanding their world and expressing anger and confusion at their inhumane treatment. Sutton-Smith (1972) echoes this argument, suggesting that those who engage in play behavior may exhibit social status within the parameters of the game which both mirror (as in the case of slave children re-enacting an auction) or violate their real lives.

The cultural significance of play has been linked to the inherently social nature of play behaviors (Monighan-Nourot et al., 1987; Pepler, 1982; Sapora &

Mitchell, 1961). Echoing Addam's desire to promote social understanding through recreation and play, Sapora and Mitchell (1961) argue, "Play, then, is a medium through which social intercourse may be promoted in our contemporary society. In many instances intolerance, prejudice, and misunderstanding can be substantially reduced or resolved only through close personal association in activities having an impelling appeal," (pp. 21-22).

### **Play and Theatre**

It is also worthy of note, when considering the contributions of Hull House to modern dramatic practice, the frequent use of dramatic terminology in theorizations of play. Interestingly, imagery of theatre is frequently invoked in theorists' descriptions of play. The word "drama," in particular, is often used in identifying the imaginary or creative play behaviors of children. When describing the behavior of children mimicking domestic behaviors in a model house Monighan-Nourot et al. (1987) note "for these...children the focus is on the *drama* that is played out among the *roles* that they have taken. A real 'situation' is extended and elaborated, rather than reproduced directly. *Plots* often carry over from one day to the next and may be continued for months," (p. 21, emphasis added). Here, the theatre terms of drama, roles, and props are all invoked in an explanation of the creative play of children. Monighan-Nourot et al. (1987) go on to identify dramatic play as a particular type of play behavior, noting, "dramatic play involves the substitution of an imaginary situation for the immediate context. Children use mental representations of objects, situations, and behavior to coordinate the roles of self and others in a covert, implicit

fashion in dramatic play,” (p. 28). Here, childhood play is being likened to a dramatic performance, despite the lack of the formal dramatic elements of a stage and audience.

Sutton-Smith (1979) furthers this imagery of drama within his discussion of childhood play, by characterizing play as “a negotiation (context) and a *drama* (text),” (p. 239, emphasis added). In this definition the context is the circumstances in which children are playing, and the drama, or text, is the play behavior itself. He describes this relationship between text and context further:

We come next to the play text or *drama* that takes place within the frame [of play]. In making up stories, for example, children have to negotiate the telling (‘My turn to tell the story’), establish the play frame with markers (‘Once upon a time,’ the use of the past tense, repetitions, fictional characters, and terminal markers, ‘they lived happily ever after’). Having done all that they still have to get on with the story, which is where narrative and *plot* enter. So also in play there is some entity within those frames. (Sutton-Smith, 1979, p. 307, emphasis added)

Sutton-Smith (1997) would likewise position performance itself as a type of play, describing several performative behaviors as play behaviors, including “playing the piano, playing music, *being a play actor*, playing the game for the game’s sake...*play voices*,” (p. 5), furthering this trend of likening the play behavior of children to creative dramatics. By likening play behaviors to creative drama and dramatic improvisation in this manner, theorists seem not only to be stressing the significance of play, but underscoring the transformative nature of drama as a whole. Further, using imagery of creative dramatics in descriptions of play resonate deeply with the radical theatre being produced at Hull House under the direction of Viola



Spolin and the guidance of Jane Addams and Neva Boyd, lending theoretical legitimacy to the work conducted at the settlement.

### **Significant Terminology**

When examining the literature on Hull House, creative drama, and play theory, it becomes quickly apparent that the three areas of academic study share a similar vernacular. Terms native to theatre are often re-appropriated for use in discourse of play theory, and the intersecting manner in which this language is utilized is illuminating in a discussion of the converging ideologies of recreation, play, and theatre at Hull House. Chief among these frequently utilized terms are *games*, and *play*.

### **Games**

Foundational to the discussion of creative drama at Hull House is the distinct use of games. Neva Boyd placed great emphasis on the cognitive significance of game playing and spent her career analyzing its impact on child development. She describes play itself as giving rise to the development of games, remarking, “Play behavior has produced some units of behavior or patterns that are called dances, games, sports, drama, stories, etc.,” (Boyd, 1971, p. 81). Here, Boyd interestingly makes a distinction between games and drama, indicating that the two are not inherently correlated, other than both having been created by play behavior.

This definition of games as a distinct form of non-dramatic play is echoed in other works of play theory. Moningham-Nourot et al. (1987) defines “games with rules” (p. 29) as a distinct type of symbolic play in which children can engage.

Sutton-Smith likewise devoted a great deal of research to the cognitive significance of game playing, noting “three major divisions of games in culture (games of physical skill, games of strategy, and games of chance) have specific associations with child training practices and other cultural variables,” (Sutton-Smith, 1972, p. 341). He goes on to articulate games as exclusively competitive in nature, even suggesting that some folk tales (those which exhibit winners and losers at the conclusion of the narrative) can constitute games (Sutton-Smith, 1972).

Spolin, alternatively, in her use of dramatic games designed to engage child actors in improvisational theatre, conflates “game” and “drama,” in a manner independent of Boyd’s ideology (Spolin, 1963). When defining a game within her methodology, Spolin’s (1963) explanation is decidedly theatrical: “GAME: An accepted group activity which is limited by rules and group agreement; fun, spontaneity, enthusiasm, and joy accompany games; parallels the theater experience; a set of rules that keeps a player playing,” (p. 382). In this manner Spolin is synthesizing the ideology of Addams (group agreement) and Boyd (accepted group activity limited by rules) with her own theatrical expertise, constituting a new definition of the word “game.” Indeed, the theatrical exercises developed by Spolin, such as “Honk, Ding” and “Touch To Talk” are universally referred to as “games,” (Spolin, 1963).

Further, Spolin’s emphasis on the cooperative and non-competitive nature of games—consistent with Addams’s ideology—violates Sutton-Smith’s conceptualization of games as exclusively competitive in nature. Spolin’s use of

“game” as a dramatic term continues even in modern theatrical practice, as performers and directors of improvisation frequently reference the “game of the scene,” or the underlying, playful behavior underpinning the improvised, dramatic action (Holly, Interview, January 15, 2015).

## **Play**

Closely linked to the use of “game” in play theory and dramatic literature is the use of the word “play.” Traditional play theory uses the word “play” to indicate recreational activity from which children derive enjoyment, usually during a period of developmental immaturity (Pepler, 1982). Mitchell (1939) summarized this view by articulating play as an “effort in which the satisfactions are in and a part of the activity itself. Play is its own reward and no other inducement is needed. It is activity *per se*,” (p. 98). Conversely, several later theorists invoke dramatic imagery in their discussion of play, likening play behavior to that of dramatic performance, and suggesting that the gratification of performance might serve as a reward for the behavior (Monighan-Nourot et al., 1987; Sutton-Smith, 1979; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Sutton-Smith (1997) identified a wide array of behaviors that constitute play, including dramatic performance.

Standing in contrast to this use of the term, the conceptualization of “play” at Hull House, established well before the above theorists began to consider their own ideology of play. In addition of the common use of “play”—to play a sport, play with a person—Hull House, due to the contributions of Viola Spolin, exhibited a conception of “play” as a more theatrical affair—to *play* a role in a production, for

example. Building on Boyd's (1971) definition of play as a means "to transport oneself psychologically into an imaginatively set up situation and to act consistently within it, simply for the intrinsic satisfaction one has in playing," (p. 79), Spolin added a performance element to these games. Rather than playing games for the satisfaction of playing, as Boyd's definition suggests, Spolin's used her dramatic games for both the joy of playing and as a mechanism for facilitating quality dramatic performances from the children she taught and directed (Spolin, 1963). Here, the *playing* of Spolin's games was gratifying to the players, facilitated theatrical growth, and the *playing* itself constituted a performance. Indeed, this conceptualization of playing as a means of performance is reflected in Spolin's (1963) definition of improvisation:

IMPROVISATION: *Playing* the game; setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem; it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene; a predominate function of the intuitive; playing the game brings opportunity to learn theater to a cross-section of people; '*playing* it by ear'; process as opposed to result; not ad-lib or 'originality' or 'making it up by yourself'; a form, if understood, possible to any age group. (p. 383, emphasis added)

Tellingly, Spolin (1963) even defines play as "a term usable instead of rehearsal in improvisational theater," (p. 388). Indeed, this practice remains commonplace in the theatre for which Spolin's ideology provided the foundation, The Second City, as directors and teachers will often tell students to get onstage and *play*, rather than to improvise or rehearse (Holly, Interview, January 15, 2015). In this sense, the ideology of play present at Hull House differs widely from most definitions

of play, in that while other theorists considered drama a type of play, Spolin viewed play (or improvisation) as a type of drama.

### **Conclusion**

The groundbreaking theatre practices conducted at Hull House in the early 1900s were not the work of Viola Spolin alone, but were in fact the culmination of Jane Addams's theory of recreation, Neva Boyd's theory of play, synthesized by Spolin into a theory of recreational, social, play, or improvisation. This synthesis by Spolin, and the unique theory of play and performance present at Hull House, is significant in its contradiction of prevailing conceptualizations of play. By integrating her theatrical expertise with the theories of Addams and Boyd, and implementing theatre programming at Hull House consistent with all three ideologies, Spolin was not only fostering the settlement's high quality theatrical performances, but was, in essence, creating an interpretation of play entirely unique to Hull House.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A TEMPLE OF SATIRE

Perhaps the most concrete, modern manifestation of Spolin's work at Hull House is Chicago's famed Second City Theater. In chapter three I will content that The Second City represents a culmination of the work of Boyd, Addams and Spolin. To best understand Spolin's significant role in the creation of the wildly successful sketch and improvisation theater, it is helpful to attempt to position The Second City as a historical artifact. Through conducting a series of oral history interviews with teachers, directors, and performers at The Second City, I have attempted to sketch, in brief, the role of Spolin's teachings in the theater's work, both as a training center for novice improvisers and as an environment which produces works of comedy for public consumption. The influence of Spolin's work is illustrated through even a brief analysis of the theater's history, Second City's continued commitment to its historical roots, the theater's distinct satirical voice, the role of play in the theater's instruction and in its generation and performance of comedic material, and in the continued expansion of the theater's training center and resident stages.

#### **“That wonderful Spolin way”:**

#### **A Brief History of The Second City**

Viola Spolin's work and collaboration with Jane Addams and Neva Boyd at Hull House can be clearly observed in Chicago's Second City Theater, the world's

premier theatre for improvisation and sketch (Sahlins, 2001; Seham, 2001; Thomas, 2012). Spolin's influence—and thus, the influence of the dramatic work done at Hull House at the turn of the century—can be examined in the founding of the theater, the theater's direct reliance on Spolin and Boyd's ideology in establishing its distinct comedic voice and brand, the intelligent and political nature of the work it produces, and the theater's continued expansion.

### **The Beginnings of Second City**

Viola Spolin's influence can be observed in Second City from its very inception in 1955, when her son, Paul Sills partnered with David Shepherd while they were both students at the University of Chicago to create a new theatre group based on the classic Italian dramatic form *commedia dell'arte*, and Brechtian-style of dramatic performance (Drinko, 2013; McCrohan, 1987; Sahlins, 2001; Seham, 2001; Sweet, 1978; Thomas, 2012). Sills, having trained extensively with his mother and being deeply familiar with her use of improvisational games to encourage actors, “envisioned a troupe of performers who would improvise original works, from politically progressive scenarios, that would comment comically on the issues of the day,” (Sehan, 2001, p. 6). The two decided to name their new troupe the Compass Players, and the group quickly attracted a cast of eccentric, intelligent, culturally-subversive University of Chicago students.

As leader of the group—which drew its name from the Compass Tavern in which they regularly performed—Sills utilized his mother's ideology and theatre games to engage actors in improvisation based on a single audience suggestion

(Drinko, 2013; McCrohan, 1987; Sahlins, 2001; Seham, 2001; Sweet, 1978; Thomas, 2012). Spolin herself—who had by that time moved to Los Angeles to launch her children’s theatre school—returned to Chicago in 1955 to lead The Compass Players in a series of workshops on her ideology of improvisation (Sweet, 1978; Thomas, 2012). The Compass Players enjoyed sold-out crowds night after night, eventually opening a Compass theatre in St. Louis in addition to Chicago, but both closed in 1957 due to financial difficulty (McCrohan, 1987; Sahlins, 2001; Thomas, 2012). Though the Compass Players had folded, Sills’ desire to form a theater based on improvised, satirical drama had not faded, and he partnered with fellow University of Chicago graduate and successful businessman and theatre producer Bernard Sahlins to find a theater to call their own.

In early 1959, thanks almost entirely to the financial backing of Sahlins, the two found and procured a building on Chicago’s North Side, formerly a Chinese laundry storefront. The new theater’s name, The Second City, was a decidedly defiant one, in response to a series of disparaging *New Yorker* articles written by A.J. Liebling criticizing the city of Chicago (Sahlins, 2001; Thomas, 2012). With Sills as director and Sahlins as producer, the two quickly assembled a cast—many of whom former Compass Players—and on December 16, 1959, The Second City opened for business (McCrohan, 1987; Sahlins, 2001; Seham, 2001; Sweet, 1978; Thomas, 2012). So eager were Sills and Sahlins to open their new theater that “as the first Second City customers arrived, the carpenter was still nailing down the carpet,” (McCrohan, 1987, p. 38).



The Second City's reliance on the ideology of Spolin continued well after its initial founding. Sweet (1978) best describes the significant relationship between Spolin, Sills, and Second City: "Viola Spolin formulated the theories of improvisation for the theater. Paul Sills, her son, has spent the bulk of his career translating theory into practice and, in doing so, has earned a reputation as one of the most important and influential directors in theater," (p. 11). In addition to Sills relying on his mother's ideology of improvisation and drama in his very founding of The Second City, Spolin continued to be an invaluable source of guidance as the young theater began to take root in Chicago. Most notably, Spolin again returned to Chicago to lead a series of workshops to "teach the new cast her games and her philosophy of improvisation, both of which became required and integral elements of the Second City system," (Seham, 2001, p. 17). Former cast member Dennis Cunningham remembers these workshops and his interactions with Spolin fondly:

[Spolin] was amazing...She was acerbic to a degree in doing the stuff, and she knew what she wanted and she worked hard to get it, and she worked you hard to try to do it and respond and understand it. And she was really dedicated and very glad to be participating in the enterprise as a whole...[the cast] definitely needed [the workshop] to get people to understand some of the same stuff so that they could work together onstage. (Thomas, 2012, p. 17)

### **Second City as a Theater of the People**

Also reflective of Spolin's ideology was Sill's desire to produce highly intelligent, politically and culturally provocative theatre, which resonates with wide audiences. This desire to create theatre that was at the same time high-brow and widely accessible appears directly drawn from the progressive theatre trend in which Spolin participated at Hull House. Notably, Second City was founded on principles

of classic drama, evidence of the training of Sills, Sahlins, and Shepherd at the University of Chicago. Sahlins (2001) characterizes this training in classical theatre as a key motivation in the founding of Second City:

We were university people, imbued with respect for intellectualism and the great masterworks. We had all served our apprenticeships in the classical theatre. We knew that ‘realism’ in our time is different from the realism of ancient Greece or of Victorian England or even of America in 1920—that realism itself is a style, a relative form...we believed in a theatre of strong texts and honest acting. (p. 11)

Indeed, while students at the University of Chicago, Sills and Shepherd studied extensively in classical theatre, and Sills quickly established himself as a director, favoring Brecht and other classic texts. Sills co-founded the University’s Playwrights Theatre Club—which preceded The Compass Players in the early 1950s—and directed Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* as the group’s debut production (McCrohan, 1987; Sweet, 1978). Interestingly, nearly 40 years later in 1995, Second City would mount the critically acclaimed sketch review *Baby Richard’s Got Back*, the plot of which was a direct allusion to Brecht’s tragedy (Holly, Interview, 2015). Further, the theater maintained a commitment to the *commedia dell’arte* style on which it was founded. The *commedia* form lent itself not only to improvisation, but to the creation of highly intellectual theatre positioned to comment on the news of the day. Sahlins describes this style as essential to the identity of Second City:

...Our kind of theatre, the kind that Second City belongs to—the demotic, the burlesque, the theater without heroes, the theater of everyday life—has continued unbroken. I feel strongly about Second City being directly in the tradition of *commedia*, the strolling players, the Roman farce, and before that the Greeks of harvest things. We do the same things in the same ways. Our

stage looks like the Greek stage...whether it was spontaneous regeneration or unconscious or whatever, we're in that tradition both in our methods and out material and in the way we view the world. I believe that is our function, to preserve that thread and the thread of the theater in general. (Sweet, 1978, p. 187)

While this foundation in the classics is largely reflective of the training that Sills, Sahlins, and Shepherd received at the University of Chicago, it is likewise indicative of the work of Viola Spolin—herself deeply committed to improvisation in the *commedia* style—at Hull House (Spolin, 1963).

Also characteristic of the Second City voice is the intellectual and often culturally-subversive nature of its work. Second City quickly earned a reputation for producing intelligent, keenly self-aware satire, and within a year of opening was labeled the “temple of satire” by *Time* magazine (Mason, Interview, 2015; Sahlins, 2001). The intellectual nature of this comedy didn't scare away audiences, and following the theater's opening “120 educated and cultured patrons grinned and chortled and laughed themselves silly at scenes that referenced Kierkegaard, Eisenhower, and Greek mythology. Onstage, actors played at the top of their intelligence (an edict ever since), skewering almost everything,” (Thomas, 2012, p. 5). Even the location of the theater—just a few blocks from the Cabrini-Green housing projects in a neighborhood consumed by racial tension—lent itself to commenting on the significant social and political issues of the day (Seham, 2001).

When examining the intelligent, self-aware, defiant satire produced at Second City, it is difficult to not observe shades of Spolin's work with immigrant children and families at Chicago's Hull House; both encouraged actors to perform

improvisation based on their own life experiences and to comment on social issues with which they were compelled. Whereas Spolin's Hull House actors used improvisation to comment on the difficulties of poverty and immigrant life (Spolin, 1963; Spolin, "Hull House Theatre program, 1940," Box 1 Folder 6, Special Collections, Northwestern University), Sills' cast used the Second City stage to comment on racial tension, political hypocrisy, and, several years later, even Lenny Bruce's arrest and obscenity charge (Sweet, 1978; Thomas, 2012).

Also indicative of Spolin's influence was Second City's desire to be widely accessible to audiences, despite the intellectual nature of its work. Sahlins (2001) described his and Sills' desire to create a communal space, through Second City, in which "idlers, including the actors...could loll around and put the world in its proper place," (p. 23). The significance of establishing a sense of community within dramatic performance is a sentiment echoed by Sills:

I think theater comes out of the consciousness of the community. If you look at the theater of ancient Greece, it came out of the necessity of the Greek community to handle its spiritual reality in a public form. Theater has always been concerned with this, so why should contemporary theater be any less so? Theater is concerned with reality. Now, reality is not to be defined by what is real for you alone. Reality is shared. And reality of the moment can occur only with spontaneity. (Sweet, 1978, p. 17)

Sahlins (2001) similarly desired "another kind of theatre...a 'popular theatre.'" (p. 19) in which the community could come together as an audience to engage with significant political, cultural, and social issues through comedy. More than creating a sense of community, however, Sahlins and Sills desired to create theatre that would ultimately change the world. Sahlins (2001) described the

founders of Second City as being “still young enough to want to change the world and to believe that we could,” (p. 11). Sills echoed this sentiment, and drew inspiration directly from his mother’s ideology, aspiring to use *commedia* style improvisation to engage actors in creating socially radical theatre relevant to all audiences (Sehan, 2001). Indeed, Sills repeatedly articulated his view of the purpose of theatre as being that of “liberation of the people” (Sweet, 1978, p. 17). Again, this ideology is directly drawn from that of Spolin, who similarly utilized improvisation to engage marginalized populations in theater relevant to their needs and perspective, with the ultimate goal of improving the social conditions within the community (Jackson, 2001).

Also reflective of Spolin’s ideology in Second City are the longer-term historical ramifications of the theatre. The most obvious and commercially successful manifestation of the Chicago-style improvisation, founded in Spolin’s ideology of *commedia*, is the wildly successful sketch review television show *Saturday Night Live!* The first of its kind and paving the way for similar sketch shows *Chappelle’s Show*, *Key and Peele*, *Upright Citizens Brigade*, *Mad TV*, and the brief-lived *Second City TV* (Drinko, 2013; McCrohan, 1987; Seham, 2001).

Individuals who had trained and performed at Second City—many of whom were trained by Spolin herself in her workshops with The Compass Players and the fledgling Second City—went on to star in *Saturday Night Live*, the most famous of these being John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis, Bill Murray, and later Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, Amy Poehler, and Mya Rudolph (McCrohan, 1987; Thomas,

2012). The infamously eccentric Del Close, twice fired from Second City for his drug abuse, played a key role in establishing the now-famous San Francisco improv ensemble The Committee, and later partnered with Chanra Halpern to establish the iO Theater (formerly Improv Olympic) and the groundbreaking improvisational form The Harold. Having trained and worked extensively with Spolin, Close drew from her ideology in his future creative endeavors (Drinko, 2013; McCrohan, 1987; Sweet, 1978). Even the practice of asking for an audience suggestion to inspire improvisation, now commonplace in nearly every improv theatre, was initially established by Spolin (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008). While it was Second City that laid the foundation for much of the popular television, sketch, and improvisation which followed, it was the work of Viola Spolin, synthesized by her son, Paul Sills, which laid the foundation for Second City.

**“We know we are standing on the shoulders of giants”:**

**Second City as a Historical Artifact**

Second City has maintained a deliberate commitment to its historical roots, both within its training center and within its resident and touring companies of professional actors. This commitment to its history can be identified within its use of Spolin’s theatre games and ideologies, its commitment to honoring and preserving its past theatrical performances through extensive archives and the re-mounting of past material for modern performance, and the very process by which a Second City review is written and prepared for performance.

## **The Use of Spolin's Theatre Games**

Significantly, it becomes quickly apparent throughout the interviews with Second City teachers and directors that the theater has maintained a close relationship with Spolin's theories and games, on which the theater was originally founded. Rachael Mason, head of Second City's Advanced Improv Program, credits Spolin with providing the foundation on which Second City was built. Mason began working for Second City in 2010 as a teacher and performer, with an emphasis in the history of comedy and dramatic, or non-comedic, improvisation. Having trained with the infamous Del Close at iO and worked closely with Norm Holly, the head of Second City's Conservatory, Mason is keenly aware of the modern trends within Second City in its broader historical context. She articulates the theater's relationship with Spolin concisely: "Spolin...the short-form skill games, building ensemble, that patience of play...the roots of that are in social change. She was trying to acculturate non-English speaking [people]...the children of immigrants," (Interview, January 15, 2015). She goes on to describe the theater's heavy reliance on Spolin's improvisation games in their Training Center, particularly in the introductory improvisation courses. Mason portrays Spolin's games as being particularly appropriate for novice performers, noting, "[Spolin] makes you get to something right away. You have to make choices, you have to be in the moment, you have to work as a team—but still...sparkle as an individual," (Interview, January 15, 2015).

Indeed, many individuals now teaching or directing at Second City received their earliest training in principles of Spolin-style improvisation and performance.

Anne Libera, Second City's Director of Comedy Studies, explains Spolin's games as her earliest exposure to improvisation, noting its significant impact on her education as a performer. Libera has worked for Second City since 1986, and has taught in the Training Center since 1991. During her time at the theater she has acted as a Touring Company Director—one of the first women to do so—and has directed several Second City sketch reviews. She is presently the Director of Second City's Comedy Studies Program, which is a partnership with Columbia College Chicago in which students receive college credit for Second City courses. When discussing Spolin, she describes in particular the simple, educationally meaningful nature of Spolin's games: "As somebody who studies this work, I recognize the idea that every game has a point of concentration, something you're trying to do, and what was powerful to me as an improviser was to try and find that point of concentration, that thing that I'm holding on to," going on to note that Spolin is now the foundation of her teaching philosophy (Interview, January 15, 2015). Interesting, Libera, like many others I interviewed, describe this continued reliance on Spolin's teachings not as a dutiful nod to the theater's history, but as a means of producing the highest quality dramatic performances from students and resident actors. She praises in detail the ability of Spolin's theatre games to release students' inhibitions and allow member of an ensemble to relax and focus on a creative project, as well as encouraging student to access a wealth of knowledge they have garnered from their life experiences and interactions with others, which may then be translated into dramatic performance. She characterizes Spolin's games as being able to, "teach



[students] how to break down recognizable human behavior...they're literally teaching you how to behave like a human...that's why we say the games teach themselves, because as you play you are discovering," (Interview, January 15, 2015).

In addition to relying on Spolin's theatre games as instructional tools, The Second City likewise frequently features these games as elements of improvised or scripted performances. Brooke Breit, a veteran Second City performer and alum of the E.T.C. Sketch Reviews *Apes of Wrath* and *A Clowncar Named Desire* described her experiences performing Spolin's theatre games on a Second City stage. Briet has written and performed for the Second City Touring Company, or Tourco, and has appeared in multiple Second City sketch reviews, leaving her familiar with Second City's modern use of both archived, historical material and improvisation as a means of generating new dramatic works. When reflecting on the role of Spolin in her experiences performing for Second City, she notes her ensemble's use of the Spolin game "Honk, Ding!"—in which an actor attempts to tell a story about an experience of another person, who will then provide sound effects indicating if the details of the story are correct or incorrect—as an improvised moment in an otherwise scripted show. She credits this scene, sometimes referred to as the "improv slot" in an otherwise scripted review, with helping the show build momentum and give the audience a brief rest from high-concept or highly political material, noting, "When you perform [Spolin games] it's very satisfying to see the rules being followed, or struggling with the rules...short-form is sometimes like a bridge to the audience understanding what improvisation is, because there are rules...versus free

improvisation where [performers are] just doing scenes,” (Interview, January 15, 2015).

### **Honoring Archived Material**

An equally significant means by which Second City maintains a connection to its historical roots is its extensive use of archived sketch material for modern performance. Second City’s Touring Company, or Tourco, consists of several ensembles of professional actors who tour the country, and at times even travel internationally, performing archived sketches from throughout Second City’s history. The success of these touring companies, who almost exclusively perform archived material and very rarely, if at all, perform newer works, is evidence both of Second City’s commitment to honoring the work of past performers, and of the accessibility and timelessness of Second City’s comedic voice. Breit echoes these sentiments when describing her experience as a performer in a Touring Company:

You take on the parts, and it’s the “Best of” show, so you’re touring the “Best of Second City.” It’s archived material. So, that’s cool in itself because the way you learn the scenes is you get the scripts and then you watch the DVDs, the old videos of the performers that originally did [the scene]. So, it could be current stuff, but it’s also very old stuff, and getting to do, like, a Tina Fey scene or a Colbert scene is really awesome, and you feel...a sense of pride. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Bina Martin, a former Tourco performer and current teacher and director in Second City’s Training Center, described the use of archived material similarly. Martin has worked for Second City in Chicago and their satellite location in New York since 2001, where she has directed dozens of training center sketch reviews. When discussing archived material, she notes the ability of older scripted material to

still resonate meaningfully with an audience. She remarks simply, “I think the best testament [to Second City’s work] is that we’re still reading sketches from 40 or 50 years ago that still seem relevant. So...in the best possible way, I don’t think [Second City’s work] has changed that much,” (Interview, January 15, 2015).

Underscoring every discussion of Second City’s continued performance of archived materials is a sense of reverence for the theater’s founders and past performers. Even a brief tour of the massive—and expanding—building which houses Second City’s Training Center classrooms, corporate management offices, and student and professional stages betrays the theater’s commitment to it’s roots, a commitment which Mason summarizes enthusiastically:

If you look at the walls, we celebrate our founders. We celebrate our cast, there’s pictures of our alumni everywhere, there’s lists of our favorite cast members everywhere. Every theatre is named after someone we loved who passed away. That’s Donny Depaulo’s Skybox, the Martin DeMaat Theater, the Mary Scruggs room right over there [motions toward a classroom]. We’re getting the Harold Ramis Screening Room, the Sheldon Patinkin Bar and Lounge. We know we are standing on the shoulders of giants, just like they knew they were standing on the shoulders of giants. Whether it was Brecht of Aristophanes...we know that what we do is steeped in tradition, and it’s very important for us to keep that alive. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

### **The Second City Process**

The process by which Second City produces and performs its particular brand of social satire is likewise indicative of its origins in Spolin’s work at Hull House. Drawing on Spolin’s teachings, Second City ensembles use free improvisation as a means of generating comedic material which will later be scripted or semi-scripted. After a production has been performed for several weeks, the show will begin a process known as “turning,” in which old sketches will be removed from the show’s

running order and replaced with new material. This process continues until the show has become mostly new material, at which point the title of the review is changed and a new show has technically been established. Norm Holly, head of Second City's audition-only Conservatory program since 1992, views this process of turning a show as deeply linked to the theater's origins. Holly is a longtime director for Second City and former Assistant Chairman of the Columbia College Chicago Theatre Department for eight years, and worked closely with Sheldon Patinkin, a former student of Spolin's on multiple productions at Columbia College. He explains this fluid process of turning a show as characteristic of Second City and illustrative of the theatre's inextricable connection to its historic roots:

Since a show never closes on a resident stage, literally you can say that the show that's running on Mainstage now, too, is a product of that very first show that happened in that space...because the show never closed. So, that very first show that was running and then slowly was replaced and turned into a new show, slowly was replaced and turned into a new show, slowly was replaced...so there's a direct line to every show that's ever been done to the show that's running right now. There's a clear, direct line, because they never close. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Also significant to the Second City process of generating scripted material is the use of improvisation in front of an audience. Following each scripted performance on the Mainstage or E.T.C. the cast will take a brief intermission before returning to the stage to perform what's called an "improv set," or a brief collection of improvised scenes based on an audience suggestion. Sometimes these sets are short-form, Spolin-style games, and sometimes the improvisation is more organic and free-form. These improv sets are free to the public, and allow the actors to test material which might be used in the next review, making these improvised sets

particularly important when a production is in the process of turning, or transitioning from one show to the next by slowly substituting new written material for the old. Breit characterizes these improvised sets as a process of discovery:

If you're a performer you're constantly thinking 'is this something'? You don't want the improv to go to waste, even if it's something that wouldn't necessarily be in the show as it is...So the improv set is a mix of putting up new pitches and other times just improvising, and other times just free improv, again, to discover. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

### **A Lack of Sentimentality**

Interestingly, Second City's awareness of its own history and reverence for its founding principles shouldn't be confused for sentimentality. Those interviewed are quick to point out that the theater is not without its flaws. Most notably, Second City's ensembles have historically been dominated by young, white, heterosexual men, with which Holly, Martin and Libera each take issue. Martin portrays improvisation in general and Second City in particular as being "somewhat ageist," (Interview, January 15, 2015) and Libera speaks at length about her experiences as one of the first women to direct on a resident company stage at the theater. Libera specifically remembers the challenges she experienced as a female performer in a theater dominated by men:

If you've ever played on a softball team...as a woman who's maybe not that good at sports, you can't even get the ball. You know? The ball is coming to you, is about to go into your hands and someone will rush in front of you across the field and jump in front of you. That's what improvising with the guys was like...there was a sort of blatant [belief that] the women in the company are unimportant. We have them here to play wives and girlfriends. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

While Second City's resident ensembles have diversified significantly over the years, resonant throughout the interviews is a sense that the theater's work is unfinished. Resonant throughout each interview is a tone of critique and nostalgia; an attitude of honoring what the theater has accomplished in the past without sacrificing the drive to create new, better comedic material. Holly articulates this attitude best in his description of the role of Second City's history in the comedy presently being created at the theater:

I very much respect the history of the building and I don't give a single shit... You should pay respect to what came before you but you should have zero reverence for it. Because your job is to move forward with the thing that just happened, in your voice and your ensemble's voice, and it's great to go back and watch brilliant stuff that people have done, but you have to do what speaks to you and I think it's detrimental to pay too much reverence for that stuff. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

**“What we are striving for is something that is to be reckoned with”:**

### **A Distinct Brand of Social Satire**

Characteristic of Second City's work is a very specific brand of social and political satire. While the content of sketch reviews produced by the theater has changed considerably since its founding, the aggressive, playful, and sometimes antagonistic nature of each review has remained largely unchanged. The Second City comedic style is both aggressively edgy and universally accessible in nature, and is designed to function as both comedic and intellectual.

### **Aggressive Satirical Content**

Typical of Second City reviews are overt satirical themes, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the theater's roots in Spolin's progressive work at Hull

House, and later, Paul Sill's politically charged sketch and improvised performances at the University of Chicago (Drinko, 2013; Spolin, 1963). Indeed, the politically-charged nature of the satire created at Second City is the intent for every production. Holly explains the brand of Second City satire simply, "On it's very best day, Second City is the beacon of all satire in the United States," (Interview, January 15, 2015). Often, this satire is packaged in a provocative, subversive manner, which Mason argues provides a meaningful experience for an audience:

The role of comedy and satire is to point out foible, hypocrisy, vanity...but the second part of that definition, which people forget, is to change it. And while you could argue that theatre is a vehicle for change, trying to get the audience to suspend their disbelief, I fully believe...that [Second City was] trying to get our audience leaving thinking differently when they left our shows. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Mason defines Second City's historically provocative use of language and obscenity, noting the theater's unapologetic use of profanity within sketches to serve its satirical perspective. Notably, the theater's earliest and most aggressive use of profanity was in response to significant historical events:

"Fuck" was said for the first time ever [on a stage] in a very big way on this stage...Del [Close] was the first person to say "fuck." When Kennedy died, somebody [in the audience] gave a suggestion of "grassy knoll"...and Del was like, "What the fuck do you want to see? What do you want us to do with that, sir?" and how that was totally breaking form, but vastly important that it happened. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

She goes on to describe a similar incident:

Lenny Bruce was famously arrested in Chicago at the Gate of Horn for obscenity, and that night the Second City cast...one cast member comes out...and goes "Did you hear? Lenny Bruce got arrested for obscenity," and the rest of the cast goes... "No shit!" (Interview, January 15, 2015)

This aggressive use of satirical content to challenge and provoke a reaction from the audience is echoed throughout the interviews. When describing Second City's style of satire, Martin argues, "What we're striving for is something that is to be reckoned with it, that it's not just parody...but we are trying to have a political voice within theatre," (Interview, January 15, 2015).

### **Universal Themes**

Also characteristic of Second City's comedic style is the universal and accessible nature of its work. Spolin's desire that theatre be accessible to all, coupled with the highly intellectual and political nature of the early work done by Sills at the University of Chicago appears to have culminated in a theatre which is equal parts intellectually challenging and widely relatable. Mason describes the universality of Second City's work as a result of their desire to discuss a variety of topics without alienating the audience:

We write from a place of abundance, we write it all. We throw how we feel at the stage, and then we refine it into something that an audience would love to see. It's not just us putting up [onstage] how we feel. We are always acknowledging that this is a show, and we don't want the joke to be on our audience. We want them to be in on it. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Martin echoes this sentiment, arguing that Second City strives to comment not just on themes which would resonate with a Chicago audience, but instead to capture "how the world is feeling," going on to note, "The line that we're always trying to ride is taking risks and being a little bit scary but making your audience feel safe," (Interview, January 15, 2015). Breit characterizes her experience as a performer



similarly, noting that even sensitive subject matter was often well-received by audiences:

[Second City has] always been known as the temple of satire, because it's the place where you can laugh about the stuff that you don't think you don't think that you're supposed to laugh about. It's a little bit of catharsis that, whether it's relationship type stuff, or political stuff, or religion, or whatever—that it is a comedy show where...you're forced to kind of think about it, and at the same time, laugh about it. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Especially telling of Second City's wide appeal is the theater's response to national tragedy. Both Mason and Holly discuss the theater's reaction to the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, noting that while shows were canceled that evening and the following day, shows immediately re-opened without sacrificing Second City's aggressive satirical point of view. Mason explains the theater's response to tragedy as striving to, "Deal with tragedy, let's deal with human experience and pour it into our work," (Interview, January 15, 2015). She likewise explains Second City's specific response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>:

[Second City was] called the Temple of Satire almost immediately...and right around 2001, I don't know if you remember what happened in 2001...*The New York Times* printed an article that said satire was dead...but when we got back, nobody knew what to do...and they got Harold Ramis to come back [to Second City] and talk about comedy...and Andy Cobb raises his hand and says "What the fuck are we supposed to do now, since 9/11?" and Harold Ramis kind of reeled back...and said "The same thing we did after MLK, RFK and JFK." (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Holly further discusses Second City's response to national tragedy, noting that the theatre is typically swift and unapologetic in its response to even the most sensitive topics:

You attack it immediately. Here's the rule: you make a joke about it immediately, or you're too late...you have a nanosecond to respond to it. And

I think you try to be as smart as you can about it, you try to make it as universal a thing [as possible]...you address it as quickly as you can and as intelligently as you possibly can. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

The influence of Spolin's work at Hull House is easily observed in this attitude of fearlessness in response to tragedy within Second City. Indeed, the bulk of Spolin's work at the settlement house revolved around assisting Chicago's neediest—recent immigrants, the jobless, the homeless, and children and adults living in extreme (Dilberto, 1990). It follows then, that the result of her work at Hull House, The Second City, would reflect this fearlessness in the face of adversity and tragedy.

### **“Funny, And”**

A concept coined by Artistic Director Matt Hovde frequently invoked by teachers, directors, and performers at Second City is that of “funny, and.” Mason defines this principal, which guides the theatre's work, as insisting that comedy serve dual functions; that of comedy and that of critical thinking. She notes, “I think we...hold up a magnifying glass to human life, and entertain people, with...‘funny, and.’ Like our job is to...entertain you and be comedic, *but*, just maybe, you left thinking differently about something,” (Interview, January 15, 2015). She goes on to argue that this concept contributes to the divers array of scenes present in any Second City review:

[Scenes] have to be sad and sweet and *funny and*. Funny and sweet, funny and sad, funny and gross, funny and smart, funny and mean. We have to be all of those in a show for it to have depth, for it to reach everyone in the audience. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Martin echoes this description, noting that she insists that her scenes “exist on two levels—on having a strong point of view and also being silly and goofy...Second

City strives...to always hit those two levels...so it's not just for laughs, but it makes people think." (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Holly extends this argument, noting that scenes need to function as works of comedy and as intellectually challenging pieces of rhetoric. He a particular scene he directed early in his career at Second City, which began as a silly, raunchy scene before becoming somewhat disturbing:

The first act ended with an amateur wet t-shirt contest. We actually did one. And it was about the reality of that, it was about a girl...it was hilarious...she got up there, and the audience was all laughing at that, and we had three guys playing complete lug heads hit her with an actual bucket of water, and she just starts crying [laughs]. Because it's like, what's the reality of an amateur wet t-shirt contest? (Interview, January 15, 2015)

This provides a telling example of the typical Second City scene style, in that the scene is at the same time very silly and comedic, while concluding with a sobering satirical statement regarding the objectification of women. By manipulating the audience into laughing at what appears to be a light-hearted scene before taking a harsh emotional turn as the actress begins to cry, Holly was delivering a forceful satirical statement.

### **“There’s a fearlessness to the work”:**

#### **The Role of Play**

Nowhere is the influence of Spolin more apparent than in Second City’s use of free play and improvisation to generate scripted material for public consumption. A reverence for play is espoused by the theatre in their training center and in the work of resident and touring company actors and directors. This use of play can be

identified in the process through which Second City generates comedic material, and in the performance of both scripted and improvised comedy.

### **Play in Generation of Material**

Consistent throughout each interview is a sense of Second City's deeply-rooted respect for creative play. Further, nearly everyone interviewed invoked similar imagery of play, fear, and kindness; play and kindness were regularly described as the ideal means through which to generate meaningful satiric comedy, while fear was described as inhibiting the creative process. Mason stresses play as being the essential factor in any class she teaches:

Fear and judgment is the enemy of play, and we want to be children and play for three hours every week. And from that fearlessness we will generate content, and from that content we will get a satirical show. If we don't play nicely together, we have nothing. Nobody knows what's going to happen, it's improv, right? So if we don't set some ground rules and play like friends and lovers there's no fucking point. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Norm reiterates this ideology when discussing his experiences as a director, trying to provoke high quality performances from actors:

The way to get someone to play is to get them confident, and to make sure their confidence is coming from a safe place that's created by you and the ensemble. Nobody can play unless they feel safe, and truly, what you're willing to be daring about changes exponentially when you're onstage. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Here, Holly defines improvisation as an act of bravery. In much the same manner as Mason, he implies that creative play is a meaningful, artistically fruitful act, but one which can likewise involve participants taking significant personal risks. Martin articulates a similar ideology, invoking Spolin's work by describing the childlike nature of play: "Kids...can be so creative, but only when they feel safe and

have boundaries. And not in a restrictive way when it comes to improv, but just so that you're protecting everyone else's right to play and have fun," (Interview, January 15, 2015).

Breit connects this sense of safe play to the sense of ensemble she experienced as a performer on a resident Second City stage. She likewise invokes imagery of safety and danger, describing trust as essential within an ensemble, particularly as they generate new material, remarking, "You have to want to create with these people around you. A lot of that is play," (Interview, January 15, 2015). She goes on to describe the philosophy of openness to play that successful performers adopt:

There has to be a joy, an open-mindedness, and a looking to your playmates for what their contributions are [to the scene]. Otherwise, you'd just be doing—you'd do a show on your own. That's not what this is, this is a sense of ensemble-created process. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Notably, the foundation of Second City's modern use of free play in Spolin's ideology is not lost on those working for the theater. Libera credits Spolin's use of simple rules to engage actors in a creative activity, such as an improvisational game, as facilitating the overarching Second City ideology of "Yes, and," or encouraging actors to agree with one another on the premise of a scene so they may then play within those parameters:

There's really...very interesting underlying rules, which goes back to that idea of fundamental agreement. On some level we [as actors] have to be in a scene together and I have to take you in and you have to take me in. That's fundamental, that's "yes, and." (Interview, January 15, 2015)

She goes on to reference Spolin directly, describing the rules to her theatre games as "those things that are very fundamental to us as children...that's why Spolin

used them and why Neva Boyd used them—the idea of a game, the idea of play,”

(Interview, January 15, 2015). Mason echoes this awareness of Spolin’s

contributions, describing Paul Sills’ use of his mother’s theatre games with adults at the University of Chicago:

Paul Sills was like, what would happen if me and my adult friends tried to play these games like children? Fearlessly, like children, but bring to it our adult intellect, reference level and emotional depth. Play like kids, but with all the shit we know as adults. And the byproduct of that was satire.  
(Interview, January 15, 2015)

The consistent utilization of themes of danger, safety, and protection within discussion of the Second City process of generating material is indicative of the sensitivity with which directors, teachers and performers at the theater approach their work. Invoking an idea of freedom of play, and the assumption that a sense of safety is necessary to facilitate this play, implies that the creative process is a deeply personal one at Second City.

### **Play in Performance**

Equally significant is the role of play in the performance of comedic material at Second City. Unique to Second City is the fact that sketches, having been derived from improvisation, often remain very loosely scripted even once they are put into a review and performed in front of an audience. Breit explains the playfulness and openness to improvisation, which remains within every performance even after scripts have been finalized:

There should be play in the creation of it and play in the doing of it, like it’s a play between the audience and the performers. You are playing with the audience, you know? Whether it’s the direct audience interaction or just

through the scenes themselves...there's a life that breathes in the scenes because of the laughter. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

The sense of playfulness suggests a general belief that scenes are never finished, despite being scripted. Breit and Martin both describe improvisation and the performance of scripted material as a process of discovery, and actors as constantly searching for new comedic moments. Libera articulates this sense of play from a director's perspective, noting that the sense of play between audience and performer can assist in adjusting scripts and finding new comedic elements to explore within scenes:

What we're doing is we're putting [the scenes] in front of [the audience] and we're seeing what their response is, and we're asking ourselves, "is that the response we wanted?" So we're not worried necessarily whether they liked it...ideally the audience is playing with us...we're not asking the audience to judge what we're doing, we're asking them to play with us. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

Invoking imagery of play is significant in Breit and Libera's characterization of a Second City performance. Similarly, the same ideals of safety and freedom which are considered so important in the generation of comedic material are invoked in nearly every interviewee's description of performance at Second City. In particular, the word "protection" is frequently used in describing actors and directors honoring the material that has been written or improvised. Breit explains this act of protection as taking steps to ensure the content of sketches is well-received by audiences by presenting it in the most efficient manner, noting, "the reason Second City gets away with saying what we say is how we package it...it's protected, that's a

word we use a lot when we create material, it's protected," (Interview, January 15, 2015). Martin speaks similarly of the scenes "Babysitter," in which nannies are having a raunchy conversation while the children in their care listen intently, and "Gump," in which a successful CEO is revealed to have an intellectual disability, noting that each scene, "sound like horrible ideas for scenes, but they're protected," (Interview, January 15, 2015). Holly likewise stresses the importance of "trying to protect the new material" being added to a review when a show is in the process of turning (Interview, January 15, 2015).

While the use of the word "protected" in describing actors' and directors' treatment of scripted material might seem an arbitrary term, when considered alongside Second City's roots in Spolin's theories of theatre as a means to engage the most disenfranchised and impoverished, it seems deeply significant. Describing both comedic material—what is being said onstage—and comedic performers—the individuals doing the speaking—as "protected" implies an intimacy and emotional significance to the work done at Second City, deeply reflective of Spolin's work at Hull House. Further, the theater's commitment to protecting the content of its productions implies a belief that something significant is being communicated at each show—that is, something worth protecting—the intent of which is to challenge the audience to reflect critically on the world in which they live. This sense of producing radical performances which aim to alter society is deeply rooted in Spolin's use of theatre to give voice to the otherwise voiceless immigrant children living near Hull



House. Mason articulates best the similar goals of Spolin's productions at Hull

House and modern-day Second City:

I think it's a fallacy that people come to the theatre to escape their own lives. I don't think that's true. I think they go to investigate their own lives further. And since we are literally holding a magnifying glass to human experience and doing satire, I think our audience know that's going to happen, and they want that (Interview, January 15, 2015).

**“There are satellites of this training everywhere”:**

### **Second City's Continued Growth**

If Second City is to be positioned as a historical artifact, it is fruitful to examine the current trajectory on which it seems to be developing and growing.

Notably, the theater has assumed a role of supremacy in providing training for novice improvisers from throughout the country and in producing sketch and improvisation performances of a high quality. Holly describes in detail the growing trend of people from throughout the country moving to Chicago to study in Second City's

Conservatory program, the professional-level training program for improvisers.

While some students remain in Chicago, and many ultimately end up performing on a Second City stage, others take their training throughout the country and establish their own theaters. This trend is a point of pride for Holly:

There's a large contingent of [students]...who come here to get the training at an elite level, because we're the only people who really train people to do this, and why would you go to any other conservatory? Because you're not going to learn from the same people. And [these students] take it away to Boston, Improv Asylum, the entire scene in Texas, anywhere you go...everywhere. There are satellites of this training everywhere. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

He goes on to describe the increased demand for Second City training, noting that the Training Center has grown in both size and level of talent during his tenure.

Mason echoes this sentiment, nodding to Second City's close relationship with *Saturday Night Live!* and various other theatres, remarking, "The Groundlings, The Second City, and the UCB are where SNL goes every year to look for new talent," (Interview, January 15, 2015). She goes on to describe the unique nature of Second City training which makes its students and performers so valuable to programs like *Saturday Night Live!*:

It's our people who can write with anybody, because of that 'yes, and' thing. Whereas another writer who's used to writing in a bubble might not be able to do that. I think this art by ensemble, art by concession, it makes for great things—bigger than you could do alone, but for which everyone is accountable. And then you go off into the world just wanting to do more good art...I would say, we're the Triple A, the minor leagues for SNL. (Interview, January 15, 2015)

### **Conclusion**

When examining The Second City as a historical artifact, the influence of Spolin's work at Hull House becomes quickly apparent. Second City's reverence for the principles upon which it was founded, its unapologetic and highly political satirical voice, its reliance on free, safe, creative play in the generation and performance of its work, and its universal appeal to both audiences and novice improvisers are all suggestive of Spolin's early work at Hull House. The reflections of Second City directors, teachers, and performers on the purpose and mission of the theater provide a picture of a theater deeply influenced by its historical roots while simultaneously maintaining an aggressive connection to current events and societal concerns. In this way Second City seems to have one foot in each lane—preserving

and revering its founders, while constantly seeking to shake theatrical tradition and challenge modern audiences. The success of the theater would suggest that this approach has served Second City well, and its continued growth as a training center and performance institution will only prompt further evolution.

More importantly, the presence of Second City reveals much about the nature of the work done at Hull House which might otherwise be overlooked. Most notably, the type of theatre performed at Hull House, and the ideological foundations upon which that work was built, is a good deal more radical than most scholarship would suggest. Much more than providing an underserved neighborhood a stage on which to mount productions, Hull House drama activities, particularly the improvisation teachings of Viola Spolin, were socially radical in its dedication to giving voice to marginalized populations through the intersecting of ideologies of recreation, play, and recreational play, or improvisation.

Second City, with its emphasis on creative, social, play (improvisation) for recreational purposes and public consumption (performance) with a distinctly satirical voice is entirely consistent with the drama performed at Hull House. An analysis of Hull House dramatics speaks volumes to the significance of Second City as a historical artifact, and a consideration of Second City's modern performances is deeply illuminative of its foundation in the radical, social theatre performed at the settlement. Conversely, neglecting the study of Hull House or Second City lessens the overall historical understanding of both. Further, deeply underestimated are the profound contributions to modern improvisational drama, including Second City,

made by Viola Spolin, who's work was the dynamic synthesis of the groundbreaking ideologies of Jane Addams and Neva Boyd.

APPENDIX A  
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Interviewee: Brooke Breit

Interviewer: Ann Goodson

Date: 1/15/15

Place: The Second City Theater, Chicago, IL

Transcriber: Ann Goodson

**AG:** Thanks so much again for letting me interview you. To get started I would love to hear your origin story—how you ended up here, your experiences in improvisation and sketch.

**BB:** Absolutely. I...well, I actually, I got into improv. I think my first exposure to improv was *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* And I think so many people have that story because it was one of the most widely viewed presentation of this thing that we do. And then when I was in college—I went to Washington University in St. Louis—auditioned for...because I always just loved comedy, it was something that I didn't want training in it specifically, I was a theatre person, but I wanted to do more of it, so I auditioned for the sketch group and the improv group, and I actually got into the improv group. So I did that all four years of college, and we used to take trips on Fall break and drive up to Chicago and see a Second City show. So all four years I was in school we would drive up, I would see a Second City show—I had seen one before I went to college as well, because I was looking in Chicago at schools, and I went to see *Promise Keepers*, *Losers Weepers*, the Mainstage. Which, it has Rachel Dratch in it, but she was actually out that night—and she wasn't on *SNL* yet so nobody knew who she was outside of the building, so I wasn't like, "Aw, I missed her!" because I didn't know who she was at the time. But, I saw Sue Gillan, who is fantastic and a performer in town, and I asked—like, that being my first sort of exposure to Second City, she's always been someone I've sort of looked up to, and became friends with later. She's always—I think she's just the coolest. So, after college, moved to Baltimore for a year, because I thought I was gonna go into education. I was like "I'm gonna be a theatre educator," because I've always felt like I was too practical to be an actor, I was like...being an actor sounds inconsistent and ridiculous and stupid and why would I do that as a job? So I thought, "I'll be an educator," but then I found out that that world was hard, too. [Laughs] So then I thought, "I think I can do both." And then I moved to Chicago after doing an internship in education for a year at Centerstage in Baltimore I moved here, started taking improv classes. So I went to iO, I did Annoyance, I did—Second City was actually the last one I did of the three training centers—and by the time I got through Second City I had been performing in Chicago for, like, three and a half or four years, and doing it all over town, and putting up a solo show at The Annoyance. So, that...I kind of was on their radar at some point, and got hired for the Touring Company after my fourth audition...so it was my fourth audition here...I got hired and I was in Conservatory at the time, so I never actually did my Conservatory shows, because I ended up leaving with Touring Company. It was very lucky, like, not a lot of people...everyone has a different path to Second City, you know? And I think that, to say, "Oh, this is my journey," there

will be similar elements to other people, but it is very new to me, that I...right time right place, I had the best audition of my life right when they were looking for someone to fill my sort of role in the Touring Company...a girl was leaving to go to Second City Las Vegas. So, I plugged right in, I never understudied, and then toured for three years. Which I loved—it was a super weird, bizarre, awesome job, I was thrilled to quit my day job to get to do that. And then, after I quit touring, about two years after that, I was doing mostly theatricals, which, I'm not sure if you're familiar?

**AG:** I'm not.

**BB:** Second City goes to cities and does, like, a city-specific show for a month. So, they'll go to Dallas and do, like, *Second City Does Dallas*, or they'll do...I did, I did two, I did one in Baltimore at the theatre that I actually used to intern at. It was fun to go back years later and be like, "Remember me?" They did. Kind of. [Laughs] I did that, and then D.C. I did a couple. So, I did theatricals, I did corporate stuff like Bizco, communications, they have here. They do a bunch of stuff. I was doing stuff in the Up! Theater, and then, getting this stage specifically [motions toward E.T.C. Stage] I had been working in the building for five and a half years, six years at this point, and thought, oh, I'd seen people who had been offered resident stages who had been here longer than me, then I started seeing people who had been here less time than me. So I was like, OK, you know, that job might not specifically happen for me, and that's OK. And, I was nine months pregnant and I got offered the E.T.C. stage...[laughs] yeah, and then I had a baby and a month later started rehearsals, and have been here ever since, doing the E.T.C. And I did two reviews, on the E.T.C.

**AG:** And the names of those reviews were?

**BB:** The first one was *A Clowncar Named Desire*, and the second one is *Apes of Wrath*. And they're very—I feel, like, very lucky to have those two shows be the ones that I did, because they're very different in awesome ways that I love. I love *Clowncar* for very specific reasons, and I love *Apes of Wrath* for very specific reasons, and so it was fun to get to have all of that be part of my work here.

**AG:** Yeah, definitely. I managed to catch both of those shows. I really enjoyed both.

**BB:** Oh, yeah! Cool, thanks!

**AG:** There was a lot of really interesting stuff in there...I like, I like you talking about teaching, that's really interesting to me.

**BB:** Yeah, I was teaching in the...so, in that two years that I wasn't touring, I taught here in the Training Center. So, I taught in the level A through E program, and I taught, I taught Scenic Improv a lot, which is in that kind of IFA world—Improv for

Actors—it's like, I know that it's more rich now, the kind of classes that they have in that world. But I like that, I like teaching those classes.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit about how you sort of structured a class?

**BB:** Well, I always like...teaching, in my mind, too, it always stealing from everybody that you love that has taught you. So, it's like, you kind of take elements of everything that you've gleaned and then use that in your own way. It's all, you know, this begets this, and we all sort of absorb each other's philosophies. And then Second City has a very sort of specific...they have a curriculum so it's, when you're teaching the A-Es, each day is sort of structured thematically as to what you should be teaching, but how you structure a class is up to you. So, it's very, "Here's what—you should be approaching character," or "Yes, and" or whatever it is, and also, here's a bunch of exercises that you should use. But, then, ultimately, you design your own class. So, I...I'm trying to think of how I...I tend to over-plan, I like a variety of things, so it's a lot of "Everybody up" but also getting to watch, because I think that's super important teaching, too—those moments where you're not always running around being a part of the scene, like, I think watching other people perform is a huge education. And I also, when I'm teaching, I always ask my students if they have seen shows, because I think that is part of your education as well, is going to see actual shows and different kinds of shows and absorbing all that as well, because there's only so much you can learn in a class that, you know, you also then see in action and you're like, "Oh, that's what that is, I get it now," so you're seeing that. Or they're not seeing it and it's terrible, and you see why. It always blew my mind, I'd be doing a class and would be like, "What shows have you seen this week?" and no one had seen a show, and one person was like, "Are we supposed to?" and I was like, "I don't know, you decide!" [Laughs]

**AG:** You're paying for these classes, so, maybe.

**BB:** Yeah,, and it's also that people are busy and they all come into classes for different reasons, so I don't expect everyone to drink the Kool-Aid, and be like, "I'm gonna go to shows every week and do whatever," but I think if you do love this and you want to do it you should be seeing stuff.

**AG:** It seems to me, just from my experiences, that there's a lot of overlap between teacher people and improv people. And that seems to go all the way back to Spolin, because she was a teacher. Is that something that you notice? Do you feel like being an improviser helps you be a better or a different kind of teacher?

**BB:** Oh, yeah. I think, I think like...for me personally, they were interconnected just because that was my background. I don't have a specifically, like, education background, it was all more just the theatre world. But maybe it comes just from being so appreciative of the things that you've learned that you want to be able to



pass that on. I also think that we are all living resources that way, of our experiences, so you feel a little bit like, “Oh, I see how I can help whoever is coming up in this world as well.” But like, as for the people that I perform with, some...it’s like 50/50, some are either inclined to have taught, enjoy that kind of participation, some people have zero interest. And it’s mostly just that they do it but they don’t have the need or desire to continue.

**AG:** I think that’s fair. Could we jump back a little bit? I’d love to hear about your time in Tourco.

**BB:** Yeah, absolutely. So, touring is such, like...when I came in, you take on the parts, and it’s the “Best of” show, so you’re touring the best of Second City, it’s archived material. So, that’s cool in itself because the way you learn the scenes is you get the scripts and then you watch the DVDs, the old videos of the performers that originally did it. So, it could be current stuff, but it’s also very old stuff, and getting to do, like, a Tina Fey scene or a Colbert scene is really awesome, and you feel like a sense of pride, like, “Oh, my God, I’m getting to do this thing.” So, I think that it’s a hard job, in that way, too, because it’s not like—the stages, we create our own material, we are writing for ourselves, whereas in Touring Companies you are honoring the material that exists, and it is...you bring a lot of yourself to it, but you really have to be good at, honoring...you’re not changing the scenes to make them work for you, you’re finding out what was funny and what made it work, and then you’re doing that, essentially. And that’s why you watch the DVDs essentially, because the written script doesn’t always have the nuances that some of the jokes—and actually a lot of the old scripts don’t have stage directions or any of that stuff, too, so you’re like, “Why is this funny?” and then you watch and go, “Oh, because she’s doing *that*, I get it, I get the intention behind it now or the actions that are supporting the lines.” You also create material in Touring Companies, but it’s peppered in with the archived stuff. Yeah, getting to take the Second City stuff all over the country and the world...my first tour we literally...went, like, eight different places within the span of a week and a half. We were in North Carolina, Virginia, we drove 11 hours from Virginia to Schenectady, New York, in a snowstorm, and I’m driving a passenger van with like, all these people behind me being like, “You’ll be fine, you’ll be fine,” and I was like, “Oh, my God, I’m going to die.”

**AG:** Those things are death traps.

**BB:** And also, like, doing shows in...back rooms of gymnasiums versus giant performing art centers. Like, we would perform in the same places that touring Broadway companies would go, and we would be running across these giant stages. You would have to be like, ok, the blackout is gonna happen and then I’m going to *run* [laughs] because the, it’s so big, the stage is huge—versus, where you’re totally exposed in this lights-up-lights-down, sort of pipe-and-drape situation. [Laughs] Where there’s somebody selling Dippin Dots in the back of the auditorium. [Laughs]

That happened before I was touring, there was this infamous University of South Carolina show where the Gamecock got onstage during intermission, and everyone was like, “Get off the stage!” and they were selling Dippin Dots in the back of the theater.

**AG:** Of course they were.

**BB:** But, it’s...you do a two act show, and like, people are...it’s so fun to bring that material to people all over the world who don’t even really know what they’re coming to see, because a Second City show is such a kind of unique type of show. Like, it isn’t like anything in particular that already existed, and I feel like anything that is like it was modeled after it, because it’s been happening for so long. This idea of it being the structure of a play, but it’s not a play, and there are disparate scenes, but it’s not...then you can find these through-lines that connect them, and there’s written stuff and improvisation, songs, and everything else that like...I think it was fun to see the response on the road of people...some people did not get it, most people love it, it was very cool. I’m trying to think if there were any other specific touring things...I got to make, my second or third week I got to go to Vienna. There are three companies, there’s Red, Yellow, Blue, and Green. And they were actually originally named after circus companies, because I guess circus companies, their touring productions, they would have a red company and a blue company. So they ended up naming the touring companies Red and Blue, and eventually they needed more so they added a Green, which was not in that world, but they needed the colors. And then, occasionally, if there’s more gigs than companies, there’s a Patchco of people who are understudies or just other people in the system who are put together for a one-off. So you get really close with your Touring Company, I mean, you spend a lot of time together on the road, you’re constantly rotating stuff and learning new stuff, too, so sometimes you’ll be on the road and you’ll be learning a new scene, you know, or, we rehearse a lot...it was a lot of fun, I loved it. I loved touring. I toured, like I said, for three years, which, I don’t think a lot of people tour that long anymore. Like, when I was doing it, people were kind of doing it for a while, but I think now there’s a push to move faster, to say, “OK, I did this, now I’m ready to go to L.A., or this, or I want to do...” and I don’t know if it’s because there’s more, like, web content or what but we were all just super happy to be there. We were like, “We could do this forever!” [Laughs] We also wanted to kill each other, but it’s...it’s like, it’s family.

**AG:** You talked a little bit about performing in very different parts of the country or even the world. Did you make any attempt to cater your show to the audience?

**BB:** No. We—unless it was requested. Sometimes in touring, you’re asked to do a clean show, because it’s a little more conservative venue, and the person who has bought the show...and event that can sometimes vary. Like, it will be a clean show and we’ll go, “What does that mean?” and they’ll say “Well, just don’t say ‘fuck,’”

and we'll say, "OK," and so we'll just take all those out. And then sometimes its like, no swears...very few times ever it was like, "Take out this particular scene because it's too much for this audience," the satire or whatever was...that wasn't as much, because that's what people were buying. People were buying Second City, so, there's the chance that you'll get offended but that's part of the game. Sometimes, like, there was a little bit of catering. We would sometimes [Laughs] just be, deal with the consequences of doing a scene that you knew was not going to go over well in a particular area of the world. But, in every area of the world there are a variety of people. So, also, you would go to somewhere...a deep South type venue, and expect some things to go over like a on of bricks, and it would actually kill, because people wanted to laugh about it. They're like, "Oh, yeah, we know this is a thing, and we think it's hilarious." The funniest thing, too, I think, is that people often thought we were catering towards them, because a lot of the Second City material is so universally relatable. They'd be like, "Oh, my God, you did that scene about Applebees! Did you write that for us?" and we're like, "No, that's...nothing was changed. That's a very specific scene that was done a million times about Applebees because it's so relatable." So, it's like...that kind of stuff, people would think that we would write stuff just for them, which was not. And we would also, like, if there was a history, we would do a customized—there's a blackout from an E.T.C. show, it's called "Heartbreak," it's the girl breaking up with her boyfriend, seemingly, on the phone, and then the out is "Boyfriend trouble?" "No, Comcast," you know? And so, we would check to see what the cable company was wherever we were, because it would hit super hard if it was like, "No, Time Warner Cable," then people would be like [Screams]. One time I forgot to ask, and I went out to do it, and...you know what *doesn't* get a laugh? What is not company? Is when you say, "No, the cable company." [Laughs]. It was like cricket-city death march, I just walked offstage and my whole company was like, "[Screams] You're an idiot!" and I was like "I forgot to ask. My bad!" But yeah, we would do the show and we wouldn't really customize too much, unless it was a specific reference that you know you can get a pop by saying a local grocery store or, like, finding out an insider tip of the place that would just enrich it a little bit more. But for the most part everything would stay the same, you know.

**AG:** That's interesting. I remember seeing a Tourco show in Kansas, right off a military base, and they did the archived—the archival scene with the guy who's deployed, and he's playing video games and talking to his brother.

**BB:** Yeah, yeah!

**AG:** It went over really well.

**BB:** Yeah, I like that one, too. I think there's some stuff, where, sometimes you get afraid of that kind of stuff, like, that it's too sensitive, but people do want to—they get that, they want to laugh about that stuff. Absolutely.

**AG:** OK, can we talk a little bit about Second City, and, as a performer and a teacher, what's your perspective on where Second City fits in the artistic world? In the bigger picture of theatre.

**BB:** I think Second City, in my mind, is...I mean, it's always been known as the Temple of Satire, because it's the place where you can laugh about the stuff that you don't think that you're supposed to laugh about. It's a little bit of catharsis that, whether it's relationship type stuff, or political stuff or religion, or whatever...that it is a comedy show where you can think about, like, you're forced to kind of think about it, and at the same time, laugh about it. And we have people walk out of our shows not...like, people have walked out before. Not a ton, but, it does happen. And, to that I go like "OK, but why did you come here?" because that's sort of...but again, people don't always know what this place is. They think comedy and they think, "Oh, come to laugh," and it's like, yeah, but we might make you think about something that you don't want to think about. So, yeah, I think it is that, it's sort of like...it's the cool kids table, in the sense that—whenever I saw the shows, it was always *so hip*. It was just, stuff felt current because we change over these shows once a year, if not every six months, and because it's not the ending place for a lot of performers, it's a springboard to other things, I think people get excited because they're coming to see, like, the up-and-coming people, too. It's an institution—what, 55 years now?—it's an institution that has been successful doing the same thing for 55 years. It just grows in the way that it gets done, but it's the same model of shows, you know? And I think that's super interesting that a place can survive that long, doing such a weird thing.

**AG:** Can you think of anything—you mentioned people walking out of shows—can you think of anything in particular that you remember audiences having a really visceral reaction to? Or maybe people getting upset?

**BB:** Yeah, we...well, in this show, Tim's religion song...when we were in process—so when you're in process you're literally figuring out the show for weeks. So, you try things, some things work, some things don't. And we'll do it in the show, so it won't even just be the set afterwards, we're trying stuff out in the show during the show. And Tim's song had some adjustments, and people are still not always—because it's about challenging the idea that, like, there are flaws in Christianity. And the funny thing is that, if you know Tim, Tim's actually a Christian, and if you listen to the words, he's calling out the things he doesn't agree with, but he himself is—we had a guy literally stand up at the end of this song one time and just go, "Boo!" and then walk out. And I...it was also when the out was different, like, the ending line was a different line, and we...it's been a much more positive reaction ever since it's ended the way it ends now, which is sort of...I'm trying to remember what the difference was. The line was not...it was like, "If you're offended right now, part of the problem is you," is how it ends. So, people, then, go, "Oh, cool, I'm gonna be

cool about it,” like, even if they don’t, they want to be cool about it. Whereas it...I think it was a little more direct, and like, preachy at the end, and people didn’t want to hear that. So I think...the reason Second City gets away with saying what we say is the way we package it. So, it’s like, if it’s packaged in something that’s going to make you laugh or throw you off guard or even make you have a sweeter ending, or whatever, however it works, its protected—that’s a word we use a lot when we create material, is its *protected*. So, that in particular was in a rawer phase, and it wasn’t protected and I think it really did offend somebody who walked out. We, Touring, we got a letter [Laughs] we get a lot of angry letters, it...it’s hanging somewhere, this letter is, but it was...one of the women I toured with was playing Mary, it was an old, archived scene about Mary and Joseph, and it’s *pretty* safe, it’s not shocking in any way. But Mary comes across as, like, super gum-chewy, this like Jersey-type, and they’re at a therapist, a family therapist, because she’s pregnant. Our director, which I loved, cast Mary as this woman in our cast who is kind of super androgynous-looking and she’s real brassy and loud, and, like, and is a lesbian. And that’s not always clear in the show, but people might assume that about her, but sometimes she does also play gay parts in the show. So, whatever. There was a letter that said that someone was offended that the Virgin Mary was being played by a “gum-chewing dyke,” [Laughs].

**AG:** That was the line?

**BB:** That’s what the letter said. And that just reveals a lot about, you know...and that’s why Second City reads that and doesn’t do anything about it, because there’s no issue. They also are smart enough to know the difference between a genuine—they’re more interested if something is not working theatrically, versus if someone’s offended by something. Like, they, we love it when someone gets mad and writes letters. So, those are the two big ones that I remember being, like...and then people walk out sometimes and we don’t always know, we hear about it later, because they were uncomfortable about something. They aren’t expecting the taboo topics, like, “I wasn’t expecting to be confronted with this this evening.”

**AG:** I like your description of it being like the cool table. I always remember leaving Second City shows feeling cooler. I felt cooler leaving the shows.

**BB:** I think so, like, it’s like...there’s a fearlessness to the work, and I think that always comes across as cool. Like, the people that we consider cool are the ones that don’t give a shit, like, it’s...it’s smart, funny and it doesn’t give a shit, and I think all of that makes you feel like, “Oh, I get it, that’s cool.” And also, like, we ourselves, the audience members get such a joy—I think half our laughs, I think when you’re getting laughs, it’s like a recognition laugh, it’s “I get that,” or “I know that person,” you know? So, yeah.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit about the process through which you write a show, how it gets put up on its feet, and then how it turns?

**BB:** Sure. It's so...a lot of it's structure depends on the director, because they will come in asking for things in different ways, and I've had different experiences depending on the director, whereas, I will either, you know—it's a mix of improvising on our feet, you know, spending time in rehearsal improvising to just discover stuff with the other people in the room, bringing in shells of ideas, of like, "Hey, here's an idea I'd like to work out with everybody. I didn't write it down, but here's the beats, here's the thing that we're working towards." And that can be as loose as "We're a bunch of dolphins," you know? [Laughs] It doesn't have to be, like, so specific. But then sometimes it is really specific, it's like, "Oh, we're a bunch of dolphins, but it's about Obamacare," [Laughs] and then you figure it out based on that. And then sometimes it's just people bringing in scripts, like people will bring in full scripted stuff. And what happens is we will rehearse during the day...so E.T.C. specifically—Mainstage does it but they, you know, have more shows so they'll have rehearsals—we'll meet during, before the show, so it'll be like two, or like three or four o'clock...rehearse, and sometimes there's like assignments, sometimes people are bringing in stuff on their own, but mostly it's assignments, it's like, everybody bring in three pitches, and they can be about anything. Or, everybody bring in a written pitch, or bring in this thing...bring in a song, bring in a movement piece...and then we'll just put them up in front of each other, and we'll cast them ourselves, so we ourselves will be like, "You, you, and you...we're gonna do this thing." And then...it then...when you join the company—so when I joined the company, I learned the old show, the old E.T.C. show, and I did that full show. So my first night on the E.T.C. stage, I was doing that show that had just happened before our show. So it was *We're All In This Room Together*.

**AG:** I saw that one.

**BB:** I went in for Aidy. So I went in for all of Aidy Bryant's parts, so...do that, then what happens is the director—because you're in rehearsals during the day and you're doing the show at night—slowly starts taking pieces out. So, it's like, OK, this scene and this scene are gone...and in that place is either one of the pitches or an improv slot. So it's like, it's all group improv slot. We had that for a while in the last show, in *Clowncar*, where we would rotate like something fun that the whole group could do. Then sometimes it's just a short-form game, just to, like, discover something from that. So you, as a performer, are just constantly thinking, "Is this something?" You don't want the improv to go to waste, even if it's something that wouldn't specifically be in the show as it is, you're trying to grab pieces of, like, "I like that, I want to do that." So, for *Apes of Wrath*, Eddie was in the show with me, in a set—so then, also, on top of that...I'm jumping around, but...we then do the show, and we then have an improv set after the show. So the improv set is a mix of putting up new pitches and other times just improvising, and other times just free improv,

again, to discover. And then those things in the set can then make their way into the show and get tried out. And not everything that makes it into the show stays—like, we will do still, for a long time, sometimes, and then it will go away because it isn't working, or it doesn't serve, like, it doesn't fit in the show anymore—but we have to always have a running show, so, like, we'll sometimes have placeholders for a while until we find what actually goes in it's spot. Cool stuff happens, like, we did, in this process for *Apes*, Eddie and I did, like, a "Sing it," like an improvised suggestion of a musical was "Gravity," so it was a musical about space. So we just improvised this whole thing based on that. We walked away from that and said, "Do you want to write a space opera? We should do that." [Laughs] Like, I think there's something really fun about finding...about this epic song about a relationship in space. That was it, and it was just based on that improv thing. And he went, "Yeah, awesome." So I literally went home and wrote the first part of that first one, the one where it's like, "I need space," it's...for context, it's a relationship of two people singing "I need space," and then it turns out what she's actually saying is that she needs to go to outer space because she's an astronaut, so it's a mapping of relationships and astronauts [laughs] a *classic* pairing of relationships and astronauts [laughs].

**AG:** Of course, yeah.

**BB:** But, like...the things that brought me joy was, that stupid wordplay made me really happy. So I just tried to think of a billion things that rhymed and then some imagery...and I just wrote the first part, and then I sent it to Eddie, and he wrote his part, and then together we wrote the last part. So that's how it happened, so it just did that. And then I told our Stage Manager, I was like, "I need a helmet!" [Laughs] and then it grew, in the sense of the director then physicalized it. The director was like, "I want you to ride someone's shoulders into the audience so it feels like you're in outer space." So, not all of that was my idea, it was just from the seed of—all I came to it with was I wanted a space opera, whatever that means, and I liked the wordplay of "I need space." And then everybody else collectively—we put all the things in the soup until it became what it was, and then it blew out bigger than *that* because we were all watching *Cosmos* when we wrote that show, so Carissa and Tim were independently writing a love song between Pluto and the Moon, not related. So then we were like, "This is something." So, then, it's a cast of six so we were like, we've got two, two, and then we wanted another piece for the other two people to be cast in. And that didn't come until the very last weeks of the show. And not everybody loves that whole epic space opera thingy in the show, but I don't care, I love it. And it was...my theatreness, nerdiness for me was like, "I want to do this, this is stupid and funny." But yeah, it took a while to figure out how all those pieces came together. And they may not have—in another version of the process they might not have all come together, but our group was pushing the show. And the producers in this building really give the cast and the directors a lot of freedom to create the show that they want to create. They come in and consult, and I think they will make notes when they see a show, of issues that they see, and suggestions, but ultimately its up to

the...us. So, as you're creating it, as you're changing things over and new things are coming in, we then start making notes of what things are working, and what are we writing towards? Do we want that? Do we want something else? And then eventually we start to feel things that are working, looking at things that will stay and work, and then we're thinking, "OK, we have those, what are the other things that we need, do we need this? Does this person have enough?" You know, and so...and stuff moves around to see where it fits best. That's sort of how the process works, and it's a crazy amount of time...it's, it feels like it's the most important thing in the world, because you're just in this room trying to make this thing, and people fight and people cry and we love it...and when the show opens it also feels so good because it's done. Its set, its done, we did it, nothing's gonna change. And then, as the show itself runs, little things will—you know, the show doesn't change, but the way certain things happen, we find a more efficient way or a better way or...we find ways to shave it down and make it better.

**AG:** Can I ask a really specific question?

**BB:** Yeah, I love it, go ahead.

**AG:** The "Hipsters" sketch—I died every time. How did that come about?

**BB:** Yeah! How that came about?

**AG:** Yeah, I saw it twice and I feel like it was longer the second time I saw it. [Laughs] Did it morph?

**BB:** So...that scene, is...I love that thing so much. [Laughs] So, Mike Kosinki, who was in the cast with me, is like, one of my super, super dear friends, like, for years. And he approached me and was like, we're of a similar mindset—like, we kind of are those people. [Laughs] Like, I would get stuff in the mail, I would get the catalogue for American Apparel and be like, "That's embarrassing," but like...he said, "I want a scene where we both work at American Apparel." And originally, Chris Witaske was a customer that was not of our world. So, when we first put it up, he was kind of like [groans] duh, awkward Dad guy, trying to shop with these two weirdos at American Apparel. And, Mike had written a script for the scene but I don't think we ever did it. He just said, "I just want to play with you, like, I've written something just in case but I want to open it up and see what happens." So we both, kind of, like, knew that...so then Chris came backstage and was like, "I'm not having fun with this," like, he sort of felt himself always playing those kinds of characters. So we were like, "Well, what if you worked in a different store in the mall, or Spencer's or Hot Topic..." and we were like, "Let's try it where we are all the same person, let's just see, like—this could be terrible, we don't know, let's try it." And it *worked*, and we were like, "This is insane that this actually works," because it's not—I always joke that...I love Mick Napier, who's the head of Annoyance, and he said, "You love that scene," and I said,



“It’s not a scene!” [Laughs] Like, if you actually look at it, like, it’s *kind* of a scene, it’s not really a scene. But we...found, in the playing of it, of...we would just try to one-up each other and do bit, and they would all kind of be themed. So, someone would do, like, Chris would initiate, “Oh, did I tell you about my bike?” and that would turn into like, three jokes. Three transportation-type jokes of us trying to one-up. And we would find in the process, too, that sometimes I would end up being last and I would be like, “My joke’s not as strong as your joke, so let’s put mine first so that it has this build.” That happened a lot in the show—also, we’re like, “This whole chunk needs to go in the beginning,” but we really just played with it until we found a rhythm. Then, we had to cut a ton of stuff, because when we first did it, it was almost, like, 20 minutes long—like, 18 minutes long. *No* scene—like, a scene can be two minutes, five, *seven* maybe, like...we ended up with...if we did it exactly the way it was scripted, it was 11 minutes. We varied night to night, we always warned the Stage Manager...that it would be anywhere from 11 to 15 minutes long. And we would get yelled at by our director who’d be like, “You’re hurting the rest of the show! This scene can’t be that long!” And it’s a hard lesson to learn that even if something is getting laughs, it doesn’t necessarily serve the rest of the show, because everything that comes after is killed. So we had to cut stuff—like, there was a bunch of joked that I loved that got cut because we just had to pick our favorites. Like, we just had to leave it this long, it could only be this long, and we would be in rehearsal and we’d come back, and we’d do it in the show that night and the Stage Manager would be like, “You gotta cut two minutes. You gotta cut.” And so we have to sit and be like, “OK, we can lose this, we can lose that.” And some nights—because it’s live theatre—it would be longer because you would let moments...let moments breathe a little bit longer, or screw around and dance...more than we should have, maybe, but it was fine, everyone was a good sport. So that’s why, nights when it was longer, we probably added things back in. [Laughs] Or, because as the show runs you find new stuff, and you’d have to stop yourself to be like, “We can’t add more stuff!” Yeah, so, one of my favorite jokes that got cut from that scene was Kosinski had a tattoo, and he was like, “This is my tattoo. It’s a dream catcher, except all of the strings have been cut because I think dreams should be free.” [Laughs]

**AG:** I’m trying to remember if I saw that one. [Laughs]

**BB:** Maybe, it was in process, it wasn’t in the actual show. It didn’t make it into the actual show. But, yeah, that was that. So many stupid jokes! But, yeah, that was a big blend of us just being a bunch of idiots and having fun with this idea that—taking a risk on something—that this could be terrible. Like, on paper, this probably doesn’t work, but in, like, our three personalities, our collective knowledge of that culture, and then just the play of it, physically and you know—because it did feel connected to us, even though—the *scene itself* is just us saying things *directly* to the audience. We weren’t talking to each other...occasionally we are, but it feels like it is a conversation, and I think that that is a cool thing to discover and like...that is the one

thing about this building is that kind of stuff can be created. So, yeah, that's that. And then we made a web series, a short, little web series.

**AG:** Did you really?

**BB:** Yeah, there's three episodes. It's called "Welcome to American Apparel."

**AG:** Oh, I have to find it.

**BB:** Yeah, its on the Second City Network. It's some of the bits from the scene and some more stuff. There's only like three episodes.

**AG:** I have to find it. I literally remember saying, "I would watch that for 20 minutes." And maybe I did, I don't know, if that was a long night.

**BB:** There's this old—have you ever seen, the old archived scene called "Bike Cops"?

**AG:** No.

**BB:** It was Andy St. Clair and Rob...it was a Mainstage show, and they were two Chicago bike cops, and they came out in a blue shirt and blue hot pants and had cups of coffee, and like, helmets. And that scene would sometimes go 20 minutes. And it was—so we, we would joke that we were totally the new "Bike Cops," because they would get away with it. They had their set places that they were supposed to go with it, but they were just two people in a specific world, just talking. But it was so funny they got away with keeping it going.

**AG:** That's a good problem to have, I think.

**BB:** Exactly.

**AG:** You've mentioned play a couple times, and that ties directly to my research—Viola Spolin and getting people to play. Can you talk a little more about the role of play and ensemble in putting a production up on its feet?

**BB:** You have to want to create with these people around you. A lot of that is play, and I think that's why—going out with nothing, you don't have to say, "Hey, you have to say this and you do this," it's the joy of being an ensemble of professionals. Anyone who's worked on these stages for a while, like, you trust each other. You may not always, like, meet eye to eye on everything—and that actually creates a good dynamic sometimes, so you're not all the same person—but...that I trust you as an improviser is key, and if I give you something that, like, I want to hear what you're going to bring to it. That play. So, the idea of play, of tossing the ball back and forth,

to go, “OK, here!” and then, “You have it, you have it, you have it,” is how we build these scenes. So that, I can’t create at all on my own of like, “Here’s this super funny idea I have.” It’s more fun to create it with a group and find that dynamic and say, “Because of who you are and who you are, I can’t wait to see what you’re gonna bring to this.” And needing that space. And even when you bring in a script, opening it up to let people to kind of have a little bit of their own voice in it, and then we whittle it down. But there should be play in the creation of it and in the doing of it, like, it’s a play also between the audience and the performers. You are playing with the audience, you know? Whether it’s the direct audience interaction or just through the scenes themselves, you’re sort of...there’s life that breathes in the scenes because of the laughter, you know? You do these scenes with nobody laughing and it’s miserable, but there’s the joy of laughing. That inspired where we go and what we do. And then, you know...I think that then we can earn some of those moments when maybe you have a little more serious moment, because it’s protected by everything else. But, yeah, it’s like there’s a childlike approach to a lot of it because...I mean the whole philosophy of “Yes, and” is not a blanket, like, “I’m always just gonna say the word yes to you,” it’s sort of your openness to what everyone is bringing to the table, that you’re not saying, “I don’t know about that idea,” but you jump on that bandwagon to discover something. And the play comes in succeeding and it also comes in failings. There’s nothing more wonderful than something just tanking, and you’re like, “Well, that was awful. We’re never doing that again.” [Laughs] Yeah, so that’s it. It is a back and forth, it’s playing a game. We play games onstage. One game—you talk about the *game* of a scene—you’re doing a relationship scene. The “Hipsters” scene—that’s what it’s called, American Apparel is called “Hipsters”—we...we found the game, and then we just played the hell out of that game. It literally was a “But, I,” “But, I,” “But, I,” and then on to the next thing to celebrate your successes of being the coolest. “I’m the coolest,” “I’m the coolest,” “I’m the coolest,” you know? And so it’s like, we found that and then we played the shit out of it until we couldn’t play it anymore, it exploded. At one point the scene used to end with that goat coming out onstage [points to stuffed goat’s head hanging from wall]. Because we talked about a goat in the scene. It changed, and then we’d sing a Boyz II Men song, and that’s how it would end.

**AG:** In brackets I’ll type “There’s a goat’s head hanging on the wall.” [Laughs]

**BB:** Yeah, there’s all these dead props. [Laughs] That was used in a pitch [points to t-shirt hanging on wall] it was never used in a show.

**AG:** The t-shirt that says “Fuck on the first date.”

**BB:** Fuck on the first date, yeah. Cool shirt. It feels important...it was not. [Laughs]

**AG:** It’s a graveyard of bits back here.

**BB:** There are things that are actually used and things that aren't. Yeah, it's like its...there has to be a joy, an open mindedness, and a looking to your playmates for what their contributions are. Otherwise, you'd just be doing—you'd do a show on your own. You'd do a show on your own. That's not what this is, this is a sense of ensemble-created process.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit about short-form? You said you used it in the game slots sometimes.

**BB:** Yeah. There's like—a lot can be learned from short-form in creating this material. Things can be modeled after structures of games, or...short-form itself is a protection, its something the audience can understand. We set up a promise of, "When this happens...these are the rules." So, when you perform its very satisfying to see the rules being followed or struggling with the rules, or whatever. That's the feet and the magic of short-form, and its also little digestible pieces of improv. So I think that short-form is sometimes like, a bridge to the audience understanding what improvisation is, because there are rules, versus, like, free improvisation where you're just doing scenes and stuff, a lot of audience members will be like, "They wrote this...this is something that has been planned and created." They don't understand that at all, because it's like, why would you just play onstage and create this whole scenario? It's a little harder to grasp of you're not familiar with improv. But short-form is...you're being told what the rules are, and you watch it happen. So I think that's a lot of fun. I love it, I love playing short-form games. I think that it sometimes—sometimes they find their way into, we do them in touring shows. We do them as like a pallet cleanser, or a little thing to pop in to help the energy, because it's always an energy boost. And then some of the stuff that we do in our shows, again it's like...influenced by the idea of short-form. So, we used to have—in *Clowncar* we did "Your first date," which is like a game show, but it's based on the short-form game called "Honk, Ding," which is where people go and tell a story and like, if its right they ding, and if its wrong they honk, and the improvisers are just improvising the story. So, based on that we gussied it up in this fancy packaging. So, it's like, inspired by that and it blew out to be something bigger. I love, I love taking short-form games and trying to figure out how to get a scene out of it.

**AG:** This has all been really helpful.

**BB:** Yay! Oh, great.

**AG:** Thank you so much for your time.

**BB:** Of course!

**AG:** Anything else, for posterity?

**BB:** [Laughs] No, I just thing...so much of what I create is based on bouncing—literally, bouncing ideas off of other people. Bouncing off the audience to find out what hits and what doesn't, bouncing off each other to, like, flesh it out. And that joy comes from agreeing and also differing and figuring out the best way to frame something.

**AG:** Thank you so much!

**BB:** Absolutely, my pleasure.

Interviewee: Norm Holly  
 Interviewer: Ann Goodson  
 Date: 1/15/15  
 Place: The Second City Theater, Chicago, IL  
 Transcriber: Ann Goodson

**AG:** So I would like to start by hearing how you ended up at Second City—sort of your origin story. How did you end up here, how were you drawn to improv?

**NH:** I started out as a film major at USC and then I was a football—I was on a football scholarship, so I decided I didn't want to make my parents pay for classes and I didn't want to pay for school, so I got my Masters in Abnormal Psychology—for no particular reason, but that served improv more than anything else. I was in—I was first an actor, and I was doing shows in Chicago, and I was very, very lucky—I was in a show at Steppenwolf called *Stringer* and I met Sheldon Patinkin through that process. I was a guest artist in *Stringer* so I guest artist as a 21-year-old—Columbia College—he hired me to teach and then almost immediately to be the assistant chairman of the department, when I was 23 years old.

**AG:** Of Columbia?

**NH:** Yes.

**AG:** Yikes, that's young.

**NH:** Yeah. And so, for him, I created—I was cabaret trained, European cabaret trained, so I created my own cabaret company at Columbia. So Sheldon was my influence in that—not only that but he let me do whatever I wanted, he wasn't trying to couch me into, into any format—I didn't know anything about it. So, I started doing shows here on dark nights in the ETC, and I didn't know what this building was I just had my own review company, and we'd do shows here. And then eventually Sheldon brought me in here to help them punch up their conservatory, when I was like 26, and they hired me to start directing shows here. So I came in here with no Second City style improv training whatsoever...I came in here with cabaret training and the influence of Sheldon, and that's it, that's how I started directing shows here.

**AG:** Can you talk—Rachel talked a lot about her relationship with Sheldon—Can you talk a little bit more about your relationship with him?

**NH:** Well, compared to me, Rachel has no relationship with Sheldon.

**AG:** Yeah?

**NH:** Its...Sheldon and I worked together, from the time that I—directly at Columbia college for eight years, from the time I was 22 until I was 30, and that's when I ended up—I was working so much here I ended up doing 90 hours a week and I couldn't do both, so I had to let go of my job as Assistant Chairman of the Theatre Department at Columbia College. So my relationship with Sheldon...let's see...I was the fun son he was never gonna get to have. And I knew that right away. I knew that, because I would do anything, I had no boundaries. And he was a classically trained concert pianist, actually—nobody knows that because of his, his horrifying stage fright.

**AG:** Really?

**NH:** So we directed a hundred review show together at Columbia and probably...about a dozen equity shows that we directed together. So, that was my relationship with him. He was absolutely the only person who had any influence on me doing this work. Because I wasn't trained in it in any way.

**AG:** How would you characterize his perspective as a director?

**NH:** Well, from having directed with him so many times, Sheldon—I was there for a very specific reason, which was I would direct the actors and he would direct the play. Because he's a brilliant, brilliant director of a production, he hated working directly with actors, as much as he loved them. And, since he passed away and...all the enamored things have been said about him—which, if you were ever with him in his office, as much as I was, so many times when he's getting high and you're on break from rehearsal and he's just talking about how much he hates everybody who's in the show, and what a piece of shit they are and how impossible they are to work with—he loved them, but he...that might...his, his job was the big picture of the production. Or sometimes the adaptation. We did, the first large-scale thing I directed with him was his original version—an original adaptation—of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which was brilliant. I actually just found a clean copy of it the other day. Of course, the Brecht Foundation don't want anything to do with it, they don't acknowledge it, but they also didn't stop the production. So...

**AG:** And that was done here?

**NH:** No that was at Columbia. I wasn't trained by Sheldon anywhere here. By the time I came here I had been working with him for almost ten years, and I started directing here. So, of course he was very helpful to me here, but that's not my association with him. My association with him is doing cabaret and equity theatre.

**AG:** OK, so...basically what I'm trying to do through these interviews is get an idea, a snapshot, of what Second City is as a historical artifact...

**NH:** Which is exactly what it is. It is a dinosaur.

**AG:** Can you talk a little more about that?

**NH:** [Laughs] I'm just kidding. I'm kind of kidding. What does Second City mean?

**AG:** Sure.

**NH:** On its very best day Second City is the beacon of all Satire in the United States. That's on its best day. So, that's what you're really shooting for. Nothing is always on its best day, but Second City has gone through—I'm talking about mainly resident companies and some training, but I can only speak to Conservatory level training, I can only speak to the training that's designed to help students do their own review shows and be in resident companies and on tour companies, that's what I've done my entire time here. I can't teach beginning classes, it's the only thing—I cannot do it.

**AG:** You can't teach what classes?

**NH:** Beginning classes. Or even intermediate classes, I tried to do it in college and I couldn't do it. I tried to teach some second semester scene study classes and those aren't the type of people I was helpful with. I'm much more helpful with people who have the foundation, so I can teach them how to be good actors or good writers...that's it. But Second City is...should be, and it strives to be, often, the beacon of social and satirical comedy in the United States, which we often fail miserably at, and then we re-tool, myself included.

**AG:** So if you were going to—it's a broad question—but if you were going to comment on the purpose of Second City, what is it? In terms of serving students or creating an artistic product for consumption.

**NH:** Well, it serves students in many different ways, it doesn't have one way of serving students. Each, each department inside of the training center, the whole, has a different purpose. The writing department has a different purpose, to, you know, teach people how to...satirical review writing skills. Some of it is also screenwriting—not the whole thing but they teach classes in it. The beginning program doesn't assume that anybody from the beginning program has any intention of doing anything other than that. A decent amount of them do. Rachel's program—advanced improvisation—in large part has become the specialty classes, but the specialty classes have, by necessity, turned into classes for people who failed their conservatory audition. Much to her chagrin. But it's absolutely necessary. And then the conservatory is—and the musical improv tends to serve that purpose unto itself, I mean you do musical improv, do improvisation, write a review, it serves us as far as getting some people out there on boats, but they're also usually conservatory grads as well—and then conservatory is to generate performers who can work in the building, and if not, create their own equally high quality work wherever they choose. So its,



all of its different. As far as what the building itself creates, its satiric comedy, theoretically, it strives to be—but it also has to pay attention to the, the changing taste of media itself—how information is received and given, which is called neuro-linguistic programming—somebody like you already knows that. And sometimes we fall into the trap, especially in resident company productions, of playing into what the culture...what is most easily digested by the culture. So, that's a battle that we have to fight. There's a difference between—you've probably heard me say this, Annie—there's a difference between something that works and something that's good. There are very good things that work, but a lot of things that work aren't good at all, but are certainly successful. And those are easy things to do and that's an easy trap to fall into. Which is like, this show *works*. I've had a lot of things I've directed where things have worked, but I've said, I don't think they're very good. Sometimes you need those things to serve the overall purpose of a show, or the running order of the show, but you have to make sure that you're whole show doesn't turn into things that are all work, but in the end create a hollow product.

**AG:** Can you think of anything specific—any specific examples of sketches that illustrate that distinction between something that works and something that's good?

**NH:** I will use my own. So, probably the most out of control shows I've ever done, and it seems to be every directing student's favorite because they just can't believe that they let me do that show, in retrospect, its weird—was, it was very, very highly content driven and very crazy. It started out with a fully-produced p-funk number.

**AG:** A what number?

**NH:** P-funk. Parliament, it's a highly produced, digitalized funk number. And its meant...it was meant to be in which John Hildreth called the entire—the audience—the n-word about 50 times. Jeff Richmond was the musical director, Tina Fey's wife—that's my joke.

**AG:** It's a funny joke.

**NH:** He's brilliant. It was very music-content heavy, very drive. So there were things in it, like...there was, in the second act, two girls danced for Bosnia. Its weird that that still applies, but it was this two college girl dance troupe and they were dancing for Bosnia. And it was just stupid, and it was meant to be stupid. And there was a Bosnia scene for, in that show also, that was just fart sounds. It was, the U.N. captured—U.N. workers trying to entertain each other while they were being tortured. Both those scene went in there because the scenes they were helping out were scenes that had very, very heavy content, and weren't particularly—if at all—laughable. Because the show was about, in the simplest way, without the audience knowing it, was about how the world was meant for people who are sitting next to each other to take care of the people sitting next to each other. And that's all you're responsible

for. So we had things like a very fun audience participation scene, a space invasion game where there were hunters onstage, and they shot and tagged a member of the audience and put a balloon on them. And they had brought them to another group of people in the audience, and they couldn't return home until that group of people had comforted them and loved them and fed them. And then they could go home. And then in the final scene—so it was fun, but building on a theme, which was very specific. And the last scene was a *crazy* 20-minute chase scene which starts out onstage. It's a famous chase scene we've seen for a long time—it was called *Baby Richard*, which is why that show was called *Baby Richard Got Back*—and about an adoptive mom having to return her adoptive child to her birth mother, which was a very famous landmark case in Chicago. And it starts out with her being forced to return the child, which is what happened, and then they go on a chase scene. There's about a 15 minute video part of the chase scene where they'd shot chase scenes, parody chase scenes from famous movies, including *The Untouchables*, where the baby's going down the stairs in Union Station...and it ends up coming back up to the stage, and the back wall of the ETC Theatre was a break-away wall, so they came crashing through the wall, ended up climbing a fence that we had set up on the far wall and ended up having the baby suspended between the two women—which was, *Chalk Circle*, is what that is—and the woman who, the person who has to let go of the baby should be the baby's real mother. Which, in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, she gets to keep the baby, but in this, reality was she doesn't get to keep the baby. So it was, it was hilarious and exciting for the audience, but in that moment the audience realized it's not funny, she's not getting the baby. We played it straight, she was just screaming "What am I gonna do without my baby?" and in the audience you could hear a *pin drop*. And then there was just a little music part to end the show about taking care of the people next to you. I lifted and directly quoted the very end of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. So, that needed—there were several very stupid things, the first act ended with an amateur wet t-shirt contest. We actually did one. And it was about the reality of that, it was about a girl who's...it was hilarious...she got up there, and the audience was all laughing at that, and we had three guys playing complete lug-heads, hit her with an actual bucket of water, and she just starts crying. [Laughs]. Because it's like, what's the reality of an amateur wet t-shirt contest? If the girl just lost a lot of weight, got her braces off, and wanted to re-invent herself, which was her story, and then again, it was...we did it on purpose, it was very manipulative, because the audience was laughing and screaming the whole time and we were encouraging it. She starts crying and the audience just goes completely silent, because they'd been cheering her on.

**AG:** And then intermission?

**NH:** [Laughs] No, and then her mother shows up. But, then there was an intermission. And the audience always had a choice whether someone in the audience got hit with a bucket of water, if someone was man enough to do it, or if she got hit. We always left it up to the audience. So that show, trickily, had very heavy

content and needed things that worked but were not good at all. So we could be let off the hook occasionally.

**AG:** To balance out. I'd actually like to talk now about the types of people that end up in this building. Either as students or as members of an audience—it seems like it's a pretty diverse collection of people. Can you comment at all on what sorts of students and audiences this building attracts?

**NH:** Yeah, well, I can speak of course, mainly directed toward Conservatory students. They're people who are dead serious about, not even necessarily being part of this community, the Second City community—although that is, of course, a main goal of many, many of them is to end up in a resident company and occupy the same space as, like, Tine Fey and all those guys—but there's a large contingent of them, who I'm probably even more proud of, who come here to get the training at an elite level, because we're the only people who really train people to do this, and why would you go to any other conservatory? Because you're not going to learn from the same people. And they take it away to Boston, Improv Asylum, the entire scene in Texas, anywhere you go...Arizona...everywhere. There are satellites of this training everywhere. And they're turned entire cities—like Austin, that whole city has got a huge improv scene. Detroit is not getting there. Really, that festival was so impressive to me. And those are—for the majority of the part—almost all of them are conservatory graduates. A lot of times they came—I know the guys from Texas who opened the regional theatre there in Austin, just said “We're out of here.” All five of them were in the same class, they were like “As soon as we're done we're out of here and we're going back to Austin to open up a theater.” Improv Boston was the same thing, they were like “we love it here, but that's not why we're here. We're gonna take this training and go back and make our own theater.” So that's...out of everything, as difficult as it is to get hired here anyway, let alone end up on a resident company—which is what it is, 90% of all touring companies are conservatory grads, somewhere around there...very high percentage level—those people are the most impressive to me.

**AG:** Second City Detroit used to be a thing, right?

**NH:** Second City Detroit I opened. I moved to Detroit, which was in Hockeytown. It was operated by the Elledge family...and they opened that amazing little theatre, which is now an amazing little bar called Hockeytown.

**AG:** What's the story there, why did it close?

**NH:** I think it's...this is...I've made it clear many times, I'm from Detroit, that's why I was given the job, partly. Also because I like the hardest job you can give me, that's the job I want to take. And the owner, Andrew Alexander knew that, he knew, take the hardest thing and give it to me that's what I want to do. So I was actually

there while they were building the building, and be a part of how the design was there, and putting together—if anyone knows anything about production or finishing jobs at a theatre, or anything that has that much technical need, somebody has to be there—so it was horrifying but it was also fun. It, theoretically—it was open quite a while. It was mismanaged, it was terrible mismanaged, because I got there, and I had been to Detroit for sporting events and stuff, but you know, you don't stay in Downtown Detroit, in the DMZ building...although that's changed a lot now especially since its gone bankrupt now, they've sort of invested in it, like \$10 billion have been invested...so, what it is, is at DMZ there's nothing downtown. You can't catch a cab, because there are no cabs. There are only a couple of hotels, they pray to get one or two airport fares a day. Otherwise, you can't walk out—in what would be the equivalent to Daley Plaza—which is where we were opening the theatre, next to the Fox Theatre, and that Little Caesar's building...you can't walk out and catch a cab. There were zero cabs in the entire downtown area. But, surrounding Detroit, everything is an upper-middle class suburb with a college in it. Not just Ann Arbor but Main State...there's like 20 colleges within ten minutes, 15 minutes of downtown. So that was clearly the audience for it. And when I was up there, it sold out for like six months, it was such a new thing. But I was only there the first month it opened, and then back a couple times to maintain the show. But, for whatever reason...I'm not a producer. I produce things, but I'm not a producer. It was also being franchised by the Elledge family...for some reason they didn't tap into that sure fire middle class audience, which is a Second City audience. And so eventually it failed, or at least the Elledge family decided it wasn't worth it, so they just turned it into a giant bar. So, its...and then it moved up to some suburb and existed there for a couple more years. Yeah, I think it was primarily mismanaged. And at the same time, we didn't...we all didn't franchise it. The Elledge family is worth like \$800 million, so, opening that Second City theatre there was just for fun, you know? So, I think closing it—you know, it might have even have been as simple as “it'd be cool if the Redwings had a bar here [laughs] you know? So whatever reason, I think it was mainly not tapping the audience. I think that's any failed theatre, for the most part.

**AG:** Can you talk a little more about the Second City audience, and how diverse or not those audiences tend to be?

**NH:** Well, it's interesting, and it all depends—sometimes it depends on the night of the week you're here—but I'm going to say of course, obviously, our audience is in large part a tourist audience. It is middle class, primarily Caucasian audience...we try to change that but demographics are a very, very tricky thing. And I can speak to that later, but—yeah, when the shows first open, obviously, a lot more of the audience are improvisers. Like, we run shows seven nights a week here, so the majority of that audience is gonna be...not much locals. And not local suburbs, I still consider those people tourists. It's interesting, because since I've lived downtown and in the Near North Side for 20 years now, its hilarious—my building is a wonderful age range. But the people who are in their 60s or so, whenever I run into them they're so excited

to ask about it, and they haven't been here for 30 years, but they remember how much they loved it. And I'm like, "Well, you should come back, I'll get you free tickets anytime you want," and a couple of them, sometimes they do—but its amazing how, unless your in the comedy field, people...maybe people don't go to the Field Museum either. I think its probably true with anyone, it's like people who live close to it, once they've been a couple of times, don't think it changes or think it's gonna be...or they just forget about it, they take it for granted.

**AG:** Can you comment at all on the distinction between the two stages, the Mainstage and the ETC?

**NH:** I think there used to be more. The feeling before was, and it certainly applied to many ETC shows, was that you just do whatever you want. ETC was experimental theatre company, or whatever you want to say "ETC" stands for is up for grabs. It certainly, that's part of it...and its changed but also stayed the same. The ETC stage is obviously better for actors. It's a closer space, it's a much more intimate space. So, I far, far prefer it to the Mainstage and that kind of presentational performance. Or, I'd have to gear myself for it. I never had a desire to direct Mainstage, I much prefer directing ETC, and I felt like I could do anything I wanted. And shows would reflect that, too. It's also the nature of the space that's that intimate, which is, you feel like—since you can get the audience in with with, you can get away with anything. I think the first couple of times, certainly the first couple of times I directed in ETC you felt like you had to win, because nobody on ETC wanted to be at ETC, they all wanted to be at Mainstage but it was sold out. I don't think...I think they're pretty even now, I don't think people think about it that way now, but certainly for starters it was like, make you work harder.

**AG:** Like a hierarchy?

**NH:** Yeah, but not a hierarchy of how the building felt about it. But your audience went "this is not where John Belushi performed" and so you like...you always felt like they were angry. So the beginning of your show had to just, like, crush them to get them on your side. So, if you look at a lot of review shows, certainly mine from there, like the opening couple of minutes from there is just the most out of control thing I could think of to do, just to get them to forget that they were mad that they weren't in Mainstage. But I think now it's pretty much just equal.

**AG:** So, if you were talking to a lay person and describing a standard Second City style review, how would you articulate that?

**NH:** I'd say that it is a series of scenes [laughs] and songs, that convey social satire, that can be connected but don't have to be directly connected. I think we forget too—you've probably heard me say it—that the only review that anyone knows who comes to review shows is Saturday Night Live. And so, its really important right away,

especially when I teach running order, that you let the audience know that you're not just gonna be telling a bunch of jokes. Or, jokes for that week, or that couple of weeks...and that whatever you start your show off with you let them know that its going to have at least some content, and that they're actors, they're good actors and performers. Not that they're not on Saturday Night Live, but the material doesn't lend itself to that, intentionally.

**AG:** So how would you describe the particular breed of satire that happens here as opposed to other theaters or other avenues?

**NH:** Well, I mean for the most part, and I'm—we're only talking about Chicago—obviously, Annoyance is much more free-rein, and its meant to be offensive, intentionally offensive and intentionally just free-wheeling. Although, not everything they do is...you can do anything you want there, that's the point, and they do free improv shows there. We talk about...iO is 90% improv, it's the method and the end goal. But they do review shows—I directed Matt Besser's review show there 20 years ago. So, people like to say that about iO, that it's all about improv, but its not, they can do what they want there, especially if they have the skill set. But as far as satiric content, I'm gonna—I mean, I was going to iO when it was in the basement of a restaurant up the street [motions out the window] because I just had friends there—it, it shoots for high improv quality. It has no need to be satiric, it is completely dependent on the performers in that review and in the ensemble. You know, or the show, because its all different—everything changes if one actor changed out. So I, I permanently replaced Blaine Swen in *Blessing*, and Blaine has a very particular way of improvising which is completely different than mine, so, you know, his shows tend to be higher energy and really goofy—though he's a really wonderful improv actor, too—and Susan and I, just the combination of, tends to create the saddest, most gut-wrenching, horrifying situations ever, that we both feel great about because we get to act inside of them. So that's—and its, even if its pure improv anywhere, iO is the best example because it's the clearest beacon of that—but here, too, its completely dependent on the ensemble, what happens that night. It could have a lot of content—like, with *The Boys*, which we do here, like, every show is different...all of them are entertaining for some reason, but some of them could get real serious, some of them from beginning to end are just flashbacks where people die in their own flashbacks. That happened like three weeks ago—and it just happened, there was no content in that show, at all, [laughs] it all came about that method, so. But in the end, Second City, the difference with it is that every single show is striving to be a satirical review show, and the format, the very loose format in a review, is the voice of that ensemble or that particular group.

**AG:** So talking a little bit about acting—can you talk a little about how your perceive Second City and the kind of work that's done here in the bigger picture of theatre.

**NH:** Well, that's easy for me because I came from a theatrical world and was very lucky and successful in that at a very young age and then got transitioned to this when I felt like I couldn't stand actors anymore. But...Second City is...trains the best actors in the country, period. A great improvising actor and/or review actor is a hundred million times better than any Julliard-trained actor or Shakespearian-trained actor, you name it. Because they're simply trained in a way that—when I was first working with Terry Kinney at Steppenwolf, their original core team—kind of what they taught...I mean, they were all Illinois State...even though they weren't improvisers they had acting style improvisation from Professor Ralph Lane, who I was fortunate enough to meet a couple of times...so, those are great actors. That's why somebody like Steve Carell or Amy Poehler, can slide back and forth incredibly easily because when you're trained that way, that's what you're trained in—you have to make a decision fast, you have to make it believable, or you have to make it fit whatever style you're being asked to do—as opposed to all the years I spent working with loser, stupid, theatre actors, which I'm dead serious about...

**AG:** At Columbia?

**NH:** No, no, I'm just talking about Equity actors. I used to call it "Equity Actor on Wheels", they're going to give you the same performance every night, if they deviate it at all they fall apart. That's not every actor but that's—the vast majority of them are just stupid. They don't learn anything—they learn their lines if you're lucky and they don't learn anything else, they don't seek to learn anything else, whereas a review trained performer, whether that's at iO or here or Annoyance, has to get smarter, or your improvisation falls off. That's why there used to be Encyclopedia's backstage, and now there's a computer. The second you hear something you don't know anything about, you have to go study it. It doesn't matter what it is—it could be, you know, metaphysical psychology—if something comes up that you don't know about, historically, geographically, anything...you have to find out about it so you can improvise on it when it comes up. So that's why the community of improvisers, for the most part, tend to be the smartest people you'll know. That doesn't mean they're the most intelligent...far from it, or their chances are the same as everyone else. But they tend to be the smartest people you'll know...they don't think about it that way. They're just like "I don't know anything about Georgia, I better read a fictional book about Georgia and I better just break out a web search on what I should know about Georgia, or anything." And that's why I was drawn to this...I think people who have more creative energy are drawn much more to improvisation than they are to something that's—somebody else wrote, somebody else is going to direct you, somebody else is going to pull a non-original score, maybe an original score, as opposed to you being responsible for pretty much everything that is involved in your success. And that's why it was easier for me at a certain point—I just said "I am never working with actors again," because I had been doing review and improvisation here, and I'm like "This is what I'm in. I can't do that anymore." And there's plenty of times when I thought I could go back and direct this one show I love, and I would

use improvisers instead of actors, and that could happen again. But I would only cast improvise-trained actors. And my friends who were casting directors—and that’s why the whole business started going that way like ten years ago—my friends were like, trying to cast commercial stuff, and as soon as I sent in students of mine or friends of mine who were really good improvisers, they just said “Don’t even send me someone who’s not an improviser.” Because in an audition...they come in, they’re happy that you asked them to come in, they do whatever you ask them to do, they know their sides, or you can have them improvise their side, and they wave and they smile when they leave. As opposed to an actor who comes in and starts asking if their shoes are OK [laughs] or if they can change their cape or something like that. I don’t remember the question now.

**AG:** That’s OK, this is all really helpful stuff. Could we shift gears just a little bit to talk about the history of this building and of improvisation?

**NH:** Well, I mean, I know all the basics—Spolin stuff—and when you started talking about Jane Addams, that was the Steppenwolf space that I performed at, was Hull House.

**AG:** Wait, in Hull House?

**NH:** Yeah, that was the second Steppenwolf space. And we did *Streamers* there. It’s an incredible space to perform in, the audience is really on top of you. Steppenwolf was, for quite a long time...now it’s just a gym. But most of the history that I know is through Sheldon. And here’s why it was made unimportant to me—and a little bit from Bernie Sahlins, too—I was forced, several of us were forced, to take a seminar from Bernie, which we eventually found out it was just because he was writing a book, he’s a delightful and fun guy, but you know...I know the history, I know the Spolin stuff, I know the Jane Addams stuff, but I was never taught it, because I was never trained here. And Sheldon, honestly, didn’t care about it. Sheldon was much, much more about what can you do now? And he would get mad at me randomly about some things—usually because he wasn’t high yet—but he, he is the greatest influence to me that way because he never talked about it. He would tell stories about people—wonderful stories about performers and stuff, but he never talked about the history of it. He was always about “what can you do next.” I was absolutely his conduit for that of just saying...just letting me, giving me some notes, “go do whatever you want,” no supervision even at a very young age... even though I had a very important job. If I had known that I shouldn’t have had that job it would have been a problem, but I just assumed I deserved it, which I sure didn’t, but eventually I learned how to do it. And him just getting his notes on what myself and my ensemble were doing then. And he never...he would just...Sheldon’s notes were legendary...would never be about “You should change your content” or being offended about anything. He would come in and go “Oh, that’s not where the bathroom door is” and you would go “Oh, fuck, he’s right, that scene made no sense



because people kept going to the bathroom through the front door.” And that’s what he was brilliant forever at, was not ever changing your content, not judging in any way...he was thrilled by whatever thing you could show him that he was not expecting, or that he was hoping was moving the art form—if you want to call it that—further ahead. He was about helping you...what helped me so much about teaching or directing at an advanced level is helping somebody with what they are trying to do, which is incredible because he kind of knew I was good at that even though I didn’t know it. It turns out from the very beginning I was, that’s what I was better at than anyone else was watching someone else’s material and picking out the things that I knew would work for them, and had more to do with their personality and what they wanted to do, but that they couldn’t see it because they’re in it. And that’s the most important job, so...I very, very much respect the history of the building and I don’t give a single shit, because, and I’ll be honest, when those guys come back here—if you don’t stay connected to this art for, you don’t know anything. And it’s no offense to those guys who came before us, but when they come back—even Alan Arkin, he came back, and he was screaming at the improvisers the whole time and asking them why weren’t they pre-planning every single thing they did. That’s all these guys, because everyone’s...everyone who doesn’t stay in it—I think it’s probably true of any profession—has no clue what happened, and especially in improvisation, if you don’t continue to work in it...I’ve had this discussion with plenty of people, certainly Sheldon, certainly Matt Hovde...I say if I walk away for a month it’s going to take me two months to catch up. So, if you’re away for any length of time—you should pay respect to what came before you but you should have zero reverence for it. Because your job is to move forward with the thing that just happened, in your voice and your ensemble’s voice, and it’s great to go back and watch brilliant stuff that people have done, but you have to do what speaks to you and I think it’s detrimental to pay too much reverence for that stuff because Spolin always helped me...clearly, based on all the work they do here...but they have almost nothing to do with scenic improvisation. Spolin is a good foundation that you almost have to have, to break the rules. Knowing why you’re breaking the rules is more important.

**AG:** Can you talk a little more about how Spolin is used in this building?

**NH:** I don’t know anything about it. I think it’s used in the A-E program. Probably in the writing program, I don’t know.

**AG:** OK. So staying on that sort of vein, does Second City take any concrete steps to preserve a connection to its historical roots?

**NH:** Yeah, here’s the simplest way to explain that which is pretty amazing when you think about it—since a show never closes on a resident stage, literally you can say that the show that’s running on mainstage now, too, is a product of that very first show that happened in that space in 1960 or 1961, I can’t remember. Because the

show never closed. So, that very first show was running and then slowly was replaced and turned into a new show, slowly was replaced and turned into a news show, slowly replaced...so there's a direct line to every show that's ever been done to the show that's running right now. There's a clear, direct line, because they never close.

**AG:** Can you describe the process by which a review turns and becomes a new show?

**NH:** Yeah, you just...there's a show up, and then you go into rehearsal, and as you go into rehearsal you're slowly trying out scenes in the existing running order, until you find enough scenes that work and then you're, piece by piece, while you're trying to protect the new material, saving as much of the old material that helps it as possible, until eventually it magically turns into a brand new show. And then you are in, technically, in previews, when the show is completely new. And then you have usually two or three weeks to tweak and/or replace things, and try out new material until your show opens. That's how it happens, you just slowly replace the show that's presently up and running.

**AG:** Are the audiences different between what are technically previews and opening shows?

**NH:** No, it's the exact same audience. They don't know what's going on. I think we call them previews, but that's just a courtesy.

**AG:** For the actors.

**NH:** Yeah, they're always going to be fine. It's very rare that a show is in a state of limbo where the show as a whole still isn't very in sync.

**AG:** How do you feel like Second City's work has changed over the years?

**NH:** Well, it ebbs and flows. I mean, it's just like...anything you watch. They'll be—because it's based on who's coming up, there's always a new generation of talent coming up, who had a different experience, and a different high school and college and training experience—the difference primarily now is, and it's hard for people who haven't been around here and haven't stayed doing this for a long time, is whereas even 20 years ago, the expansion of your ability to get trained extremely well in improvisation is times a thousand. So, if 20 years ago or 30 years ago or 40 years ago there were maybe a dozen really great improvisers, now there's 500 really good improvisers. There's 100 great improvisers, and there's still 20 fantastic, top of the line, improvisers. As opposed to you having 30 people to pull from. So that's—the level of talent and training is what's changed it the most. Which is why there's so many independent comedy theatres and improv theatres around town, because you do absolutely have the talent to run them, and that would not have happened—that's the

primary change is people are trained so well. By the time someone graduates conservatory here they've probably been trained in college, were maybe on a college team, they've probably had classes at iO, maybe Annoyance, maybe ComedySportz—they've hit a thousand more baseballs than anyone could have imagined at all 20 years ago. It just didn't exist. So when people aren't just coming in from Texas or Boston or Arizona or New York, we're not just coming here to take Second City classes, they probably graduated college and graduated improv training center where they came from, and now they want to get even better. So, yeah, the level of talent is what's changed more than anything.

**AG:** Do you think the satirical point of view has changed at all?

**NH:** It changes because it changes the way society is—it depends on where you are, what part of the country you're from—but it absolutely changes based on what the media is doing. The PC thing always cracks me up because the PC thing ebbs and flows, like, what people will get offended at in class changes depending on what, who, what the administration is...and you have to remember Hillary Clinton started it, more than anyone, she was the one who was like rating video games, and “you can't say retard” and “you shouldn't be able to say ‘idiot’ or ‘moron’” even though those used to be medical terms, too. It ebbs and flows, because there are points where people are very PC about it, and now it's kind of having a moment where people at Columbia College and stuff, too—you'll see them and suddenly its like “nobody cares, we're sick of that, we'll say whatever we want.” And then a little bit later, we'll get kind of PC again and then the next generation will say “we care about what your intentions are.” Now its more about what kind of spectrum you're on, mostly a sexual spectrum, which cracks me up. And I tell people that when they ask what's the difference between teaching at a college—and they think I'm kidding—and I say not so much with the comedy kids, but absolutely true, I don't even really get to ask you how you identify. First I have to ask you if its ok if I ask you how you identify, then I can ask how you identify, and then you don't have to answer or you don't have to really know. So, that stuff's all fun for me. But, they're the people who drive what changes. It's driven by whatever generation is coming up next. Even two years ago, during the Occupy stuff, suddenly everyone was super political—18 to 30 I would say—and were just angry and wanted the shows to be about that and were hyper-political, and then that got pushawed by the media, and it died off, and now its gonna come back again. It's whatever's happening with people 18-30, but mainly 18-25.

**AG:** So, if I'm a layperson, and you're trying to give me the best archived shows to go see to get a snapshot of Second City, what are they? What are your top five?

**NH:** I don't remember their names, but these are the two that seem to excited directing students most: which is my show, which is called *Baby Richard Got Back*, and then the Mainstage show which was the primary driving force, which was called *Pinata Full of Bees*. Those are the two that I would say, there's a million great shows

and a million great scenes—every show has great scenes—but I’d say those two are the ones that we get super excited by because they don’t look like a Second City show. Other than that lights go up and down between the scenes, they absolutely don’t bear any resemblance to what people think of as review shows.

**AG:** Can you talk more about that? What makes them special or different?

**NH:** Well just what people say. I remember one that I was the director, it was my show—production value was a huge part of it, because I had so theatrically turned anything...I think you could think about any of my shows that way, depending on who’s in it, too. And I was like “let’s blow something up, let’s see if they’ll let us blow something up...let’s light something on fire, see if they’ll let us light something on fire...let’s make this big...let’s make a wall that breaks apart,” even though we had no idea why. We just said “make the wall collapsible, we’ll figure it out,” and we also tried to do a Velcro wall with Velcro suits where no one ever left the stage, you’d throw yourself against the wall of Velcro, except then you can’t get yourself off the wall is what we learned, or you tore your suit in half[laughs].

**AG:** Wasn’t Scott Adsit in that review?

**NH:** Yeah. That didn’t work out—well, it was never in our review, because it didn’t work. It was a great idea that never made it in because we didn’t think through it all. Like, four square feet of Velcro can’t be removed unless you have, like, three professional strong men trying to take you down. Otherwise you’re just stuck on the wall and you have to tear your suit off to get off. It was a noble idea. But, I think that *Pinata* sort of...*Pinata* intentionally had more of a Harold or long-form feel to it, where you felt like there were tons of callbacks...finish scenes later. And then we copied that form, which I thought was not a good idea for a while—I thought it lead to things that were good, but they tried to do every show like *Pinata* for a while, you know, and they had a lot of failure there because it wasn’t that ensemble. I’d say those shows were the most, super heavy content, too. Super theatrical. That’s why people are always surprised by them, by the content and the theatricality.

**AG:** What about the content made them different?

**NH:** It was hardcore. Very, very—and, like I said before, balanced with a lot of stupidity, but very, very hardcore content. The best kind. Which also involves being willing to do the sweetest thing, too, because---in *Baby Richard* there’s a scene where a guy takes care of his mentally challenged sister, and he’s supposed to go away for the weekend to a college reunion, and he can’t because his brother forgot to pick her up from where she worked. And so, it’s unbelievably sentimental—and so that’s the scene, not the one that uses the n-word 50 times, or the wet t-shirt competition, or putting people in physical danger by climbing a fence on a wall—that’s the scene where we had to fight making jokes, because we were like, its too sentimental. I’m

like, its exactly what it needs to be based on what this show is, and audiences would cry during it, and stuff like that. But that kind of content is hardcore, especially in a show like that, where an audience is coming to see a comedy review and then they're being forced to care, which is the ultimate trick, I think, for us to play in this building, is you're tricking people into caring.

**AG:** Can you talk a little about how shows in this building react to what's going on outside?

**NH:** Well, obviously, directly, politically they do. At its best—and I think this is how you look at the 1960s, the original Chicago people—here's the thing that's lost that way. I came here and I said "I'd rather see somebody do a good poop joke than tell a Ronald Regan joke," because everyone who's watching a show here knows what they think they're supposed to laugh at, which is liberal politics. Which, there's no such thing of anymore—at least not Democrats, Democrats aren't liberal anymore. So, you address what's happening in society socially and politically, but I think the original—the University of Chicago stuff—said you're access to satire is to make fun of yourself first, and they were incredible at that. That's why you pay real reverence to those old guys—pay attention to how they were making fun of themselves...what losers they were, how ineffectual they were...how over-educated they were. Then you can feel free to attack anything else in society, just as long as you understand that you're the problem. Or, go about it that way. You're the problem, now try to be helpful. I don't think there's enough of that anymore.

**AG:** I can dig that. What about bigger events, how does satire in this building react to things like 9/11?

**NH:** Well, you attack it immediately. Here's the rule: you make a joke about it immediately, or you're too late. And 9/11--that's the way media is now. Maybe you don't say it out loud, but we probably do here. That whole thing of "tragedy plus time equals comedy"—its like, here's the amount of time you have, and now its too late. You have a nanosecond to respond to it. And I think you try to be as smart as you can about it, you try to make it as universal a thing, like—one of my best friends, the late great Jim Zulevic, the night of 9/11, he called me up and he said "What, am I supposed to like firemen now?" [laughs]. He hated firemen for some reason. So he said it, and then he spent the next hour talking about Hasboro games that he would make based on 9/11. One of them was Al-Qaeda Jenga, and the other was "Tip It," where a fireman was balanced between the Twin Towers. And so—it was horrible, but at the same time he was raised in Catholic school so he ended it by saying "I gotta go now, I'm going to Hell." But, you address it as quickly as you possibly can and as intelligently as you possibly can. And you have to be smart about it. It gets more and more difficult as the media has helped to make people incredibly stupid. The media is so biased that the simplest things—the simplest stories that happen in the world have become impossible to talk about. And its your job here as a director and

instructor to try to get people to talk about it. But people don't like it—they like to think that Russia is bad, when in fact we're destroying their economy on purpose. They've done nothing but try to defend their boarder, and yet we keep trying to crush their economy, and its all because of money that goes between Syria, Russia and Iran. And when you say that—you can literally look it up, and people look at you like you're a conspiracy theorist, and they treat you like one. But, no, just look it up. The IMF is furious—and that's what all these things are done for—because there's billions of dollars that have been exchanged, because they want to become part of the EU, which is why the Ukraine has been forced by a proxy war to join the EU. Its about billions of dollars. But, you know, even something that's that simple...its like, because of the way the media is, you don't hear anything about it. So being smart about something socially, especially politically, becomes a real war. Even though that information is available out there, you have to do—and my thing was, you can't just research something, you have to sub-research it, sub-reference your sources at least once, two or three times. Because even some of that stuff—like *Huffington Post* you can't really trust anymore, there's some things that are marginally trustable, you have to go further in your research. So, the job of satire has become incredible...a lot harder to be smart about.

**AG:** I'm going to switch gears again—do you have any thoughts on the connection between improv and teaching?

**NH:** Well, its...since I've taught theatre classes and graduate theatre classes and advanced improv classes...if you're a good improviser you can probably teach anything. And I'm talking anything. If you gave me two months to research astrophysics, and you wanted me to teach a basic class in it, I guarantee I could teach it, because being a good teacher is about coming to understand the people in the room before you do anything else. And, you know, if you're good at that—if you become good at identifying the nature of the people in the room, who is in the room as an individual, and who they are as an ensemble, there's no other way for you to really start beginning to see how to communicate with them so that they can learn best. That's why cookie-cutter instructing is so painful, because probably two people in the room will learn in, and they probably mostly knew it already, and other people, it won't be serving the purpose, and they'll have to work incredibly, incredibly hard to get the information.

**AG:** Can you talk at all about the role of play in improvisation.

**NH:** Yeah, play. Play. [laughs].

**AG:** [Laughs] Can you say more about that?

**NH:** Well the way to get someone to play is to get them confident, and to make sure their confidence is coming from a safe place that's created by you and the ensemble.

Nobody can play unless they feel safe, and truly, what you're willing to be daring about changes exponentially when you get onstage. That's why so many warm-ups are about getting people to reveal personal information—not tragic information, but personal information—so people begin to feel safer and safer and realize...my favorite thing about revealing information that's going to be used for the rest of the day is, no matter what anybody else says, you always feel like they're crazy. Like, I had a kid who—like, I said whatever simple thing I said and he was like “that's nuts!” And I was like “that's nuts that I was driving my Dad's car around when I was 12? You went off a cliff in your car and didn't die, you landed in a bail of hay,” and he was like “Yeah, pretty much.” So, that's crazy, but you don't think its crazy because its you. You just think its boring. So, everyone thinks they're boring, for the most part, until they start revealing information, even the simplest piece of information, is stunning to someone else who doesn't have that experience. That's a huge part of that, building trust.

**AG:** I've exhausted my questions, thank you so much for your time.

**NH:** Thank you so much, this thesis will be a masterpiece.

Interviewee: Anne Libera  
 Interviewer: Ann Goodson  
 Date: 1/15/15  
 Place: The Second City Theater, Chicago, IL  
 Transcriber: Ann Goodson

**AG:** Thanks so much for letting me interview. I know this is a really broad question, but I would love to start by hearing how you ended up here, what your experiences were with writing an improv.

**AL:** Sure. So, I...I grew up as a child actor, so I had actually a fair amount of straight up theatre training, but also, you know, any one of the number of child...similar, actually, to some of the Spolin stuff. The Twin City institute for talented youth, I was part of their youth ensemble there. And so, we did a lot of what I now recognize [laughs] as the games. Because nobody ever said...I just realized now “oh that’s what that was!” and, then went to Northwestern for theatre, was a theatre major...really with very little interest in improvisation as a thing. In fact, probably at the time, I did a couple of projects that had some improv elements, but again, not Spolin improvisation, not Second City improvisation—and actually had this..I was negative about the idea of using improvisation as a way of getting at theatre. I did a lot of Meisner, did some brief workshops with Charna that she doesn’t remember [laughs].

**AG:** They were improv workshops?

**AL:** Well, she did—that was when she was planning on doing a...she wanted iO to be competitive college groups. So she put up signs asking for college students who were interested in creating a team, and I did a couple of workshops and didn’t like it.

**AG:** Is this when it was still Improv Olympic?

**AL:** Yes. And then, really, backed into it. I was working at the Organic Theatre as a stage manager, and Michael Gellman was doing The Seed show, which was a project that he did that was using improvisation to create play scripts.

**AG:** What was the name of that show?

**AL:** The Seed Show. He did a couple of them, using, if you’ve seen *Process*, his book, using those elements. And then...based on that, I started—through Michael I got a job in the Second City box office. At the time, if you worked here full-time you would get classes for free, so I was like “what the hell.” And really...when I say I backed into it, it wasn’t anything that I was like “yeah!” you know? [laughs]

**AG:** This is my calling now.



**AL:** Yeah. And, in fact, Susan Messing makes fun of me because we went to college together and she says—she says, I don’t know if this is true, so between you and I and the three different ways you’re recording this [laughs].

**AG:** The seven people who will read this.

**AL:** Yeah [laughs] she says that when she told me I was doing improv that I scoffed at her.

**AG:** Really?

**AL:** Yeah. Anyway...so, that’s...and it really wasn’t until I started taking classes here that the experiences I’d had...that I was able to look back and go “oh, that’s what that exercise was.” And also, “oh, they were doing improvisation work with me, but I didn’t realize what they were doing.” And also to sort of see how some of, like, the Meisner style improvisation and some of the other improvisation I had done...where that all fit. So that was really...and, and, became an improvisational performer. And then coming out of that and sort of going “but I’m also a”...because directing is really what I did, it’s what I did at Northwestern. So finding all those pieces coming together. And going “Oh I love this stuff.” And you know that, when you start doing it, there’s...when you really start doing it in a way...it’s really easy to teach improvisation badly. It really is. And I think a lot of people have had the experience, when, sometimes...you know, people have taught it badly, either in such a way, in that sort of drama therapy way that means it’s all very emotional, and you’re in each other’s business, which is not what teaching good improvisation is—or in such a way that you have no idea what the hell is going on. So, coming here and being in classes and suddenly having that “oh! This is what this is...this is really good! This is the stuff!” and then I never left. That was 30 years ago [laughs].

**AG:** What was your time like as a performer? Were you performing here?

**AL:** I performed here, I performed—I was in a...I performed at a place called the Improv Institute, which doesn’t exist anymore, it was on Belmont. The theatre that they built was...is now the Hungry Mine? It’s a coffee house now. And I was in a group with John Favreau of all people, and Haratio Sans...and a guy who now writes for Disney. And then I moved here and fairly quickly transitioned into the Touring Company.

**AG:** So you were in the Touring Company?

**AL:** Yeah.

**AG:** I’d love to hear about that.

**AL:** That was a weird time. It was a weird time for Second City, it was a weird time...there was a lot of focus on the time on funny, there was a lot of focus at the time on...other things happen, I actually wish in retrospect...I was like “I’m working at Second City!” and there was other stuff happening at iO and around the city and I didn’t join that, I didn’t get that. In retrospect, I wish I had done more, because I enjoy improvising, I love to improvise, but I’m not a joke-driven improviser, and that was what we did that that time. There was a time at Second City when Second City was very interested in...was very interested in who was going to be the next star, does that make sense?

**AG:** Yeah, it does.

**AL:** There was very much a—and it was very much a boys’ club, really hardcore.

**AG:** I would love to hear more about that.

**AL:** [Laughs] No, just...you know...in a way that was both... I’m terrible at sports, but if you’ve ever played on like a softball team with a bunch of guys, as a woman who’s maybe not that good at sports, you can’t even get the ball. You know? The ball is coming to you, is about to go into your hands and someone will rush in front of you across the field and jump in front of you. That’s what improvising with the guys was like. There...and it wasn’t...it wasn’t malicious, although there was also a general—it was said very blatantly, there was a sort of blatant, you know, “the women in the company are unimportant. We have them here to play wives and girlfriends.”

**AG:** Yeah, to be the mom in the scene.

**AL:** Yeah. I think I had a real realization...and now I’m like “when was that?” I remember having a realization while improvising, that the strongest thing that I could do as a female improviser was to not try to play the same game that the boys were playing, but to play a different game that would force them to come to me. That I couldn’t compete, what I had to do was play an opposite, and they had to incorporate that. But if I tried to compete they would always win because they were already setting the game that they’d been playing since they were ten. You know? And the strongest improvisation that I could do was to come in with my own thing that they had to include and they had to adjust. You know? The...that was a real, sort of, [makes explosion noise].

**AG:** What did that look like specifically onstage? Did that mean you played really masculine characters, or the opposite?

**AL:** Often times it meant, too, the opposite—because, if I’m playing men, it means that...well, one realization was that I could play sex. And I could play sexy. And that was a way of getting powerful, getting power. The other realization was that I didn’t have to play the wife. Or no, I should say—if they made me the wife I didn’t have to be *that wife*. If they made me the wife I didn’t have to be generic and not interesting, I could have something going on that was powerful enough that they would have to deal with it. But it was bad because it was really about me recognizing that I couldn’t compete...it feels like “oh, of course, don’t let them label you” but it was actually more because it was like “they’re setting up a scenario that they’re good at,” and I felt like I wasn’t good because I couldn’t compete at the thing that they were good at. And then I was like “Oh, wait, I don’t have to play that game at all.” And that’s where everything else came from. Does that make sense?

**AG:** Yeah. Is it fair to say you were finding your point of view, and getting comfortable with that onstage?

**AL:** Yes, and also, recognizing that I couldn’t improvise by bringing on all the baggage of being a feminist and...I couldn’t be responsible for all women, for being a feminist, for having left-wing...you know? I had to come in with a strong thing and let that point of view come out of that, rather than trying to be something.

**AG:** That makes a lot of sense. To me, as a performer, all of that makes sense, what you’re saying. [Laughs].

**AL:** [laughs] Yeah, because I would, I would be like “oh, this has to be a feminist scene,” and the minute you do that...[makes bomb noise] its like your head is giant on this tiny, skinny neck.

**AG:** Right, or that sense of paralysis, I think sometimes when you realize like “Oh, I’m the mom in this scene,” and then your brain—

**AL:** Oh, I’m fucked! Right?

**AG:** Right!

**AL:** And this is a very Annoyancy thing, if you will, but also realizing that I needed to come in with a strong—not—I needed to come in with something strong that was a strong emotional state, if that makes any sense at all.

**AG:** It makes so much sense to me. As an improviser more than as a grad student, it makes so much sense.

**AL:** Well, to kind of tie it into your thing—is that, in its essence, is where Spolin-type improvisation is so brilliant, because it’s the idea of the point of concentration.

And, again, as a teacher and a theorist, whatever that is...as somebody who studies this work, I recognized that idea of every game has a point of concentration, something you're trying to do, and what was powerful to me as an improviser was to try and find that point of concentration, that thing that I'm holding onto—and that its actually best when its not a complicated idea. Its best for me when it's a strong emotional state.

**AG:** How does that differ from your perspective, from what some people would call finding the game of the scene?

**AL:** Finding the game of the scene is between two people. So the game is what happening...what happens—this is my theory—my feeling on it is...and ideally—I'm standing up, by way, write that down.

**AG:** She's standing up, got it.

**AL:** This is a Gellman thing, [holds an imaginary object] I've got an imaginary prop that gives me a feeling. And then the game of the scene is how this thing that I'm coming in with interacts with whatever you're coming in with. [Sits down] So that's something that we're going to play together based on my being present in a...a vibrant or interesting reality. For me it helps if its not specific. If I come in with a lot of backstory, I'm dead, but if I come in with this kind of weird feeling in my stomach, and a little bit of energy, and then you're coming in with a different energy, and then we just spend that time discovering how those two energies interact, that's the game of the scene.

**AG:** That all makes so much sense to me. So, I've interrupted you multiple times. Can we—when last we left, you were at Tourco. What happened after that?

**AL:** No worries! I took the job as the, actually the...so I took the job as the manager of the training center, and I did that job for quite a while. This was when...when I went into the training center it was just the Conservatory, we only had 90 students. You know that whole office up there? [Motions outside her office door to the third floor] I was all of them. And then, and then did that for...and that was just when Joyce Sloan was...Andrew was coming back, he had been in LA, Kelly had been hired as the...as Andrew's assistant and Director of Sales, and there was sort of a new Second City thing happening. So I got involved in that from a managerial perspective, and then Kelly asked me—because I was really still working, I was still performing and doing other things—Kelly asked me to direct for him for the Touring Companies. Joyce...OK...off the record—not really, just to be clear this is only my opinion—things were very dysfunctional then, so there was a point at which Joyce Sloan would just tell your castmates that you weren't going to move forward, that you weren't returning, and then they would tell you.

**AG:** As a director?

**AL:** No, as an actor. So...yeah. I mean, there was a very, a sort of like “I’m quitting before I get fired.” And then as a director—Kelly brought me in as a director—and I directed. At about the same time, maybe a little before then—so I was working as the director of the training center, and Martin DeMaat who was the artistic director of the training center started having me teach as well. I actually started out by teaching the acting—I created the acting program—there’s an acting class for improvisers, and then, based on that, I start teaching within the improv program. And so, simultaneous with that, I started directing in the touring company.

**AG:** What year-ish was that, that you began directing in the touring company?

**AL:** ’91? Like ’91, ’92, somewhere in there. So...[picks up a picture from desk] this is ’89 and I was working in the box office then, so...here’s Kelly Leonard, my husband, washing dishes in the back of the bar on the same day. Allison Riley was taking those pictures. So, like, ’91 somewhere in there. Yeah, that’s about right because a little while ago I found Touring Company audition sheets from ’93 or ’94, and that was the audition where—I have all my notes and I circled who got called back—there’s a young lady named Tina Fey, who got called back, and then another girl named Amy Poehler and we misspelled her name and called her back.

**AG:** Oh, this is in her book. Have you read her book *Yes, Please*?

**AL:** Yes, yes, I gave it to her...those are my sheets.

**AG:** OK, I wondered. I just read that passage.

**AL:** Yeah, those are mine. They re-sent them. We mailed them to them, so they could take photos of them and return them, and now...I can’t find them [laughs]. I mean, luckily, they’re in Amy’s book so...

**AG:** It’s been documented.

**AL:** Yes.

**AG:** We’ll just blame Amy Poehler if they’re lost. We’ll blame her.

**AL:** [Laughs] Yes.

**AG:** OK, so you’re directing Tourco, then what?

**AL:** I did Tourco, teaching, and then...left...running the training center in order to direct my first resident company show, which was at Second City Northwest.

**AG:** Can you talk a little about that?

**AL:** Sure, in what way?

**AG:** Was it in this building?

**AL:** So, for about six years Second City had a theatre in Rolling Meadows, in the towers, in an office. [Laughs].

**AG:** Is that in Chicago?

**AL:** No, suburbs. Rolling Meadows, so...kind of near Schaumburg?

**AG:** OK, I'm not from Chicago.

**AL:** Yeah, it's maybe—depends on what time you go there. Its anywhere between 30 minutes and an hour and a half from downtown. I mean, it was an interesting place to work...it was, it really was an office tower mall, so not a great atmosphere for an audience to come in. We did have a huge group of high school students who were, who came and saw every single improv set. They would come and see because there was literally nowhere else to go. But it was hard to create a show because the audience for the set was not the audience for the show. So, you would do something in the set—and we were trying to do, this was during the whole Gingrich versus Clinton time, so we were trying to do some things very political, there was a lot of anger going on at the time in politics—and it was very hard because you would do something in the improv set and the kids would love it and you would do it in the show and the adults would be like “no.” It was much more right-wing, I mean, just, even in terms of that area—much more right-wing than down here. It was interesting. Amazing cast, that included Nancy Walls, who's married to Steve Carell, Dave Koachner...Todd Stashwick, Theresa Mulligan who's been on a number of television shows, I'm trying to remember...but really good cast. But, it was...you know, I was one of the first women to direct at Second City on a resident company stage. In Chicago we've had more, and Toronto, but still tough in term of that Second City way, that we don't do anymore now—because as a director at Second City you were, you were generally just sort of thrown into the mix and it was either sink or swim. And it helped if you'd been in the company—if you hadn't been in touring company, the learning curve was so steep—and still is, you can't go in as a director and not have that...if the cast has more knowledge than you you're dead.

**AG:** You need that foundational knowledge.

**AL:** Yeah, and that's really hard to get that foundational knowledge, you know? So there was a long, long time where we would put directors into the touring company or

even just a resident company and they would just get eaten alive. And, and to a certain extent when I look back on my experience, I did pretty well in the touring company but I look back on my first resident company show and I just think “Oh, man” because there’s no...it’s like “Oh, go do this impossible thing, and we’re not gonna tell you how to do it, and you need to be in charge.” And I look at the show and there are some things where I’m like “Yay!” and some things I’m like [groans] and some things where I’m like “God damn them!” because I’m recognizing how, how much of my own...like, if I had a fifth of what I know now how much more I would have manipulated them to get what I wanted. You know, because that process of creating things from improvisation is really complex, and its very difficult to...you know, you give...Sheldon Patinkin says you give notes to the actor and the writer answers, and you give notes to the writer and the actor answers, and everybody has so much emotion around—and also because its *Second City*—everybody has so much emotion around what they’re doing, how they’re doing it. So, as much as we’re all based in play, we’re all based in these wonderful ensemble things, there’s also the process of putting up a show, the process of doing all those things, surrendering your ego and yet...this is the thing that could get you hired for *Saturday Night Live*. This is the thing that’s gonna, you know, change your life. This is your legacy. And so, it’s a very...it’s a very complex, complicated process.

**AG:** Can you talk a little more about the role of play in improvisation?

**AL:** Sure. Fundamentally, in a good process—and this is something, you know, in a good process, what we’re doing...its almost on the level of what they talk about in terms of design...we are...the ensemble functions as a right brain, they are...we set up, whatever we’re setting up that we want to do, a premise for a scene—but then you play. Ideally...God knows we do it, sometimes, the other way, but ideally I come in with a premise, I give you a premise—who, what, where, plus something that raises the stakes. Something that makes us go “yeah, we want to do this scene!” versus another scene with a who, what where. We get up onstage and we play. We don’t worry about the idea for the scene, we don’t worry about whether its good or bad, we simply...we use the spring board of the premise that we brought in and we play. And the director’s job at that point, ideally—so we’re all right brain at that point, which, you know, doesn’t exist anymore, [laughs] but whatever, but we’re all...what is it, system one or system two?

**AG:** I don’t know. I believe you.

**AL:** We’re all in that present space where we’re playing with each other, and then the director’s job is to provide that critical function—“I’m going to watch that playfulness and I’m going to reflect back to the players what excited me, what interested me, what pieces to explore further.” And then, ideally, we make adjustments, and then we play again. And then, from that, we’re gonna take the rough blob that we created through our play and bring our own critical elements to it

to shape it into a scene. But I think really one of the things that's been brilliant about the Second City process, when its working right, is that...that push-pull between process and play and analysis and product. And that we go back and forth—and one of the things that we do is not only go back and forth between process and analysis, but we also put the process in front of an audience so we can...so we're not doing a...we're not surveying the audience to find out "did you like it?" you know? What we're doing is we're putting it up in front of them and we're seeing what their response is, and we're asking ourselves, "Is that the response we wanted?" So we're not worried necessarily whether they liked it—which is a different thing—but that's part of the process to, because we're not...ideally the audience is playing with us...we're not asking the audience to judge what we're doing we're asking them to play with us. And then we're asking, is that the kind of play, literally...[laughs] that we want? Is that the play we want? And then we adjust our work to create the intersection of play with the audience, play with each other, to create a piece that has meaning, and ideally, is also funny.

**AG:** Yeah, although I imagine sometimes the intention of a piece can be to alienate the audience or to make the audience uncomfortable.

**AL:** Yes. Absolutely, if you look at a show like *Pinata Full of Bees*, that's an example of a show that's constantly, like, you know...slapping the audience across the face and then going "No, no, no, it's ok" then [mimes slap] "No!" then "No, no, no, it's ok." And, you know, it's very...you look at that running order that's exactly what they're doing, that back and forth. That "here's some candy" and then "no!"

**AG:** That's the one that opens with the plant in the audience getting into the fight, right?

**AL:** Yes. Yes.

**AG:** Yeah, even just watching it on the footage, made me uncomfortable.

**AL:** Its horrible. The very first...its, in fact, very specifically, that opening is designed to play into the audience's worst fears. The audience's worst fear coming to Second City is that they're going to see...that we're going to be political, and we're going to yell at them, and we're going to take them out of the audience and make them do something. And Jon Glaser was so brilliant in that because he...you...every single night you thought "Oh, my God, this is some poor guy from the audience." And then, just at the point when you were like "Oh, my God, I can't take it anymore," it turns out he's an actor...they do this great, crowd-pleasing, *Rocky* music thing where he wins, right? And the whole audience, we're like "No, we weren't gonna do that to you! Candy!"

**AG:** It is very gratifying, that turn at the end, because its so unsettling.



**AL:** And then, and we look at that running order...then they do a fairly traditional Second City scene, a classroom scene where they do all the traditional things in terms of meeting all the members of the company, in personas close to themselves, and then they go from that into a scene that we can't really do anymore because the word "retarded" has meaning now..

**AG:** "Gump?"

**AL:** Right, then they go into "Gump," which is a very traditional, very funny, very crowd-pleasing scene. So, "Scary! No! Oh, this is so good! Oh, look, its *really* good!" then Jon Glaser comes out as the moralizer and says "You realize you just laughed at a retarded guy?" That whole show has that quality, of like, just when you think you're OK, you're not, and just when you feel like you're not OK, you are.

**AG:** This is a side tangent, but I've been thinking about "Gump" a lot. It's been a while since I've read it, but the language seems so significant, like, the use of the word "retard."

**AL:** Yeah, we can't tour it anymore, because so many people have...it was really interesting, one of the directing students tried to do, tried to do it with different language.

**AG:** Like saying "a person with a disability" as opposed to "retard"?

**AL:** We tried...we've done a couple things, because we kept looking for...what's the synonym? The problem is there's no good synonym for "retarded," because "retarded" has a history as a diagnosis, so it is...you could, while no one says this anymore, you could be legally retarded.

**AG:** It was a medical term.

**AL:** Right. So, so its got a history as a medical term, and it also has a history as a childhood slur. There are no other words that function as both. So the one...she was trying "you are officially dumb dumb." Its just a slur, there's no technical term. There's no diagnosis term that functions in both those ways, does that make sense? So the whole, the whole scene...and in fact, because the whole scene is about status, ok? The joke of the scene hinges on this very low status HR guy having to use a, a medical term with his boss, that is also a playground slur. Right? And then having his boss not respond. [Laughs]. So he has to work himself up to say this horrible thing, and then his boss is like "OK, what else you got?"

**AG:** And then he speaks back sort of in silly language.

**AL:** Right, see? So its absolutely connected to that word, and I don't think—we keep talking about it because its such a good scene and it has smart things to say, and even the things that it says about the world, which is that you don't have to be...that success in corporate America isn't connected to intelligence, is true. There's a more essential truth there, but that one word, the minute you say "retarded" in this day an age, the audience is gone. As well they should...there's no...

**AG:** That's the best way I've heard it explained. I think about that scene a lot because I really like it, but you're exactly right there's no way to...

**AL:** Yeah, and we keep trying. [Laughs]. And one point we were like "What? Give me more words!" but no, because its got to be...it is, its so specific to that language.

**AG:** That's a good example I think of a sketch as a historical artifact—like, it worked, and it was so, so, so good, and there's no malice intended with it but now times have changed.

**AL:** Nope, not at all, we have a different perspective on that word and on how that works. And that's true—you know I teach History and Analysis of Modern Comedy, in the Comedy Studies program, so one of the things we end up talking about is we think about it as an artifact, and you have to look at it and go "Oh, that's what that was then."

**AG:** Yeah, it's the Huck Finn effect.

**AL:** Yes.

**AG:** Although, the intention of Huck Finn was different.

**AL:** Yes.

**AG:** Thank you for entertaining that tangent, that's just something that's interesting to me. OK, can we back up a little bit? I would love to hear more about your relationship with Spolin and what that has looked like. Do you rely on Spolin at all, when you teach, when you direct?

**AL:** Spolin is...is really the foundation of my teaching. There are sort of two stories connected to this. One was that shortly after I started...became the director of the Second City Training Center...so, when Marty died, I had been directing, and then when Marty died I became the Artistic Director, because I had been directing for a while before then.

**AG:** Did his theater exist at that point? The DeMaat, did it exist in this buiding?

**AL:** No, we created the DeMaat as a...we named the DeMaat after him after he died, after he passed away.

**AG:** So the physical theater existed but it wasn't named the DeMaat yet?

**AL:** No, we didn't have this whole wing [motions outside office door].

**AG:** OK, the timeline of that gets sketchy for me of when add-ons happened.

**AL:** Well, we...we...when Marty, shortly before Marty died...before Marty died we were talking about the fourth—so we had the Skybox, but the whole area on the fourth floor that is all those training center classrooms, was, was, was a big empty room, with an amazing view—but just a big, empty room. When they renovated all of Piper's Alley it was as though they renovated with absolutely no idea—literally, no idea what they would use it for.

**AG:** It's a labyrinth, out here.

**AL:** It's a labyrinth, and its like "What did you think this was? What did you think these things were gonna be?" [laughs] and we have really just sort of gradually taken it over, because there was no other business that made sense there. So we took...so, we had the Skybox, we had a couple of classrooms that have now turned into offices, and we used the Mainstage and ETC of course. And then, we took over—we renovated the...we were in discussions to renovate that space when Marty died. So we renovated that space...that space must have opened sometime in 2001. And then we renovated this space, the third floor, created the DeMaat in 2009. So, so...and now we're doing, and now we're doing more renovations.

**AG:** More big stuff, definitely.

**AL:** Yeah. So, just imagine how the training center has grown during the time that I was there as the managing director—we grew 90 to about 600. And then from the time I was Artistic Director we grew from—we were at about 800 at that point—we grew to...like 2,000 per semester, and now we're at about 3,000.

**AG:** Its incredible to think about. I'm sorry, I interrupted you again.

**AL:** No, its fine. Where were we? Spolin!

**AG:** Spolin, yes.

**AL:** So, Spolin. So...I was asked to run the—was I directing then? I must have been. Sorry, I just...this part of the timeline I don't remember anything. Regardless, I was asked to run the auditions for the Second City theater that we were opening in Detroit.

And we saw...oh, God, we saw almost 1,000 people over two days, it was ridiculous. Held open auditions in the city of Detroit, and then out of that, out of those call-backs, we ended up with about 20 that we really liked. But, this is where you sort of went “Oh, we have no idea. We’ve got 20 people who we think are great.” And that included Jerry Minor, who’s gone on to do other stuff, Colin Ferguson...a bunch of really great people. But we didn’t...like, “do we want to use them?” You know? Unlike here, where we generally have a good sense of...we’ve seen people. So...Alexander asked me to run three weeks of workshops with those people, and then based on that we were going to showcase for the producers, so have—so, we could get a better sense of what they were going to do, but also...and, Martin DeMaat, God love him, talked me through a whole series of exercises. And, in particular, I have a very vivid memory of—it was that, kind of the first time that I had really taught “give and take focus,” and just kind of...working with that and having it be...like, I’d done “give and take focus,” but like, Marty really talking me through...Marty had studied with Spolin, directly. Really talked me through every single step, and being like “this is brilliant!” Like, to take it with advanced people, and to take it to its furthest extent, and to really look at it like a microcosm of...of scene work, and of extraction of scene work, was astonishing.

**AG:** They all have slightly different names, can you describe really briefly what that is?

**AL:** Rigid give-and-take? This is, its “Rigid Give And Take” in Spolin.

**AG:** Is that the one where you have two scenes happening?

**AL:** No, no. So, the fundamental of “Rigid Give and Take” is that one person moves at a time, when I give you focus, you move. And then the next level of that is one person moves at a time, but you take focus from me and then we move. I don’t give it to you, anybody can take it. And then eventually you do, one person moves at a time and you can either give or take focus. So, I’m moving, I can either give you focus or you can take it from me and then I stop. And then that moves into a softened version of that where you’re not frozen, so you add sound and ultimately what it is...you can build to a stage picture, and it becomes, in that wonderful Spolin way of “how do you create a scene that feels like its got blocking, without blocking it?” Give and take focus is a way to establish that. And its really hard to do—there’s like nine layers to it, but if you’re working with really advanced people and you start with that basic and then you move forward—and that’s the same thing, you know, Sheldon played that exercise with the Steppenwolf cast. Over and over, and over and over again. That’s one of the things that Sheldon talked about, that—how the games create ensemble. And that’s a great example of—just play the game. Just play the game and that creates ensemble. And it does. It’s weird. I taught—the last two summers I’ve taught improvisation to the students at the Ryan Center, Opera singers, who have no theatre experience. Like, two out of...these are, they’re students but they’re

highly experienced, and during the season they serve as understudies for the main singers, a couple of them have gone—they are next up. And out of twelve of them two of them were theatre trained. Two. And so, I taught...you know, playing the games with them.

**AG:** Did you find that Spolin speaks to them, as theatre novices?

**AL:** Yes, well what was fascinating about it was it spoke to them both as...just really simple things, about focus—and, on a certain level they're also just like "I don't even know if it helps but it's so new"—because I was like "There's no mistakes! Anything you do is right!" and they were like "We don't even know if this is helping, but it's so the opposite of everything we hear in opera, that this feels like therapy [laughs]. But, here's the piece that I was to say, is that—it was fun, and they did good, they were great, but it wasn't until the next summer, when they came back, and they said "We did 'pass the clap' every day. Every day. And they were an ensemble—that's what was interesting, was to come into that room the second year and realize that the improvisation they had done the first year had transformed them into an ensemble.

**AG:** So even without a formal director saying "We're doing these exercises" the games had still sort of stuck with them?

**AL:** Yes. Playing the games and continuing with the games—because they played the games then, they had played the games all season with each other.

**AG:** That's incredible.

**AL:** Yeah, it was cool as hell. It was like "I can't believe you guys!"

**AG:** Are there any other Spolin games that you can think of off the top of your head that you find especially helpful when you're directing?

**AL:** Yes. So...so...give and take focus is, I think...and in my book [laughs] I do a whole thing on why I think it's so important and all that. So, give and take focus. The other thing is—Marty took me through all that stuff—the other really incredible learning thing for me was, was much later, after I had become Artistic Director for the training center, and while Marty was sick a bunch of people had gotten hired...I don't want to say accidentally, but...accidentally...and Marty had been individually training everybody...and he couldn't anymore but he didn't want to give up the power, and we needed more teachers. So sometimes somebody would get—would come in as a sub for somebody, and then, they would just kind of end up teaching a class. And we were growing at the same time—one of the very first things I did when I came in as Artistic Director was, was watch all the faculty. Because a lot of the faculty had been hired with no vetting, they had just sort of started teaching. And that was *unbelievably* like...and then out of that we did two teacher training sessions. Oh!

Oh, I have to mention this. One of the other really brilliant moments for me was watching Avery Schreiber teach. Avery Schreiber was one of Spolin's students, original students. He was a Second City, a famous Second City actor who actually became really famous when I was a kid because he was in, like, a Fritos commercial. So, like, in my head, he had a big bushy mustache and its him carrying a bag of something. But he, in...in Los Angeles was one of the primary Spolin teachers, and he came and did a workshop here as part of the Chicago Improv Festival. And, he did "Gibberish," an exercise that most of our students hate...

**AG:** I hate it.

**AL:** [Laughs] well, this goes back to that thing that you can teach it well or you can teach it poorly. And its always been a rough one for me, I don't like playing it, and my students have not liked it, and I...I had not intended to go but my class was at the same time as his workshop—he was doing the Mainstage—and they asked "Oh, do you just want to bring your class to this thing?" and I said "Sure." So I'm sitting on the bench and being all cocky and watching them, and within five minutes I've got my legal pad out and I'm [mimes taking notes] because, this is the thing—again, this goes to point of concentration—is that the point of "Gibberish" isn't "blah, blah, blah,"—the point he side-coached...and again this is the importance of side-coaching, of a very specific kind... there are lots of things that Spolin does that are like, if you do them right, its brilliant, the games teach themselves if you side-coach it right, the games teach themselves to the people, you don't have to tell them what they're supposed to get. And what Avery Schreiber did was, his side-coaching was—it was basic gibberish translator, so you speak in gibberish and I translate it to you. Right? The most important thing, the most important thing was mirror. The most important thing was you speak to me, and when I translate to him, I use your exact gestures and movements. That's the most important thing. And what it does is it teaches you that you don't have to—when you're doing it, when I'm doing your exact gestures and movements, the words come out, it's obvious. So, it's not that I have to think of it in my brain, we're co—then all of the sudden its about that play, we're co-creating. So, if I'm absolutely mirroring you, then its all there for me already, and I'm just speaking what you spoke, which is what all those gibberish, gibberish translator, foreign film—they're all about that, they're all about not worrying about what's going to come out, because it already exists in what you're doing with your partner.

**AG:** That makes so much sense.

**AL:** It's so...it's like so dumbly obvious once you see it. But, like, so many people freeze up with "Gibberish" because it feels like its about "I have to do something, I have to make something up, I have to make something funny."

**AG:** It gets heady rather than physical.

**AL:** It's the opposite...its dead-on the opposite...and there's a number of exercises like that. For me, the sequence of repetition, touch to talk, eye contact to speak—which are also exercises that, if you just do the exercise, if you just repeat the last line your partner says before you repeat your next line, it teaches you about a level of staying connected to your partner, about a level of—it teaches “yes, and” without that “*Yes, And!*” thing. You have to take in what your partner did before you respond, and that's an exercise that at any level—so, for very beginners and also for very experienced improvisers—and this is the other thing I love about the Spolin games—for anybody at any level you're going to make a new discovery. Advanced improvisers have a level of like...oh, again, it doesn't matter what I say its about me taking in what you gave me and responding. And if we do that, the scene's going to progress. We are going to “yes, and” each other. That's agreement. Agreement is that I heard what you said and I am responding to it. Not that we're both in the jungle. Does that make sense?

**AG:** That makes a lot of sense.

**AL:** It's a different way of thinking about it. Similarly, “Touch To Talk” is, again, you have to do it right, so you have to make new physical contact every time you speak, and you can't speak if you're not touching, and you have to make justified physical touching, it can't be this [touches chair with foot].

**AG:** It can't be weird stuff, yeah.

**AL:** Yeah. Which is what Level C students want to do.

**AG:** That's what eighth graders want to do.

**AL:** [Laughs] Yes! But, again, if you do it right, it forces you to raise the stakes. You have to either become intimate with your partner—because you only touch people like that when you're intimate with them—or the scene, the stakes of the scene have to be raised because again you're not going to do that and have it make sense. Because when do we do that? We touch each other when we're intimate with somebody, we touch each other when something really sad, or horrible, or important is going on. So, the minute you start to play that game, the stakes of the scene happen on their own, you don't have to make them happen. Same thing with eye contact to speak—you know, and everybody wants to just stare into each other's eyes, but it's like no...it's like, I can't talk unless I'm in connection. And, the other weirdest thing about eye contact to speak, is when we're making up a story we do this [looks at ceiling].

**AG:** Yeah, if we're fibbing we look up.

**AL:** Yeah, we can't do that. So I can only stay in the present with you. When I'm playing "Eye Contact To Speak" I can only stay in the present. Very hard to go into what Marty DeMaat used to refer to as "story," where I'm making shit up over here, right? I've gotta be here.

**AG:** Inventing things up high.

**AL:** Right. So, those things are, to me...that set of exercises is again, really pivotal because...because of what they do. That, and the other one is, Michael Gellman, man, he drives me crazy [laughs] but he knows more about this than anyone. I remember him doing—because for a long time we would do, we were a smaller faculty, we had faculty meetings every term, and as part of the faculty member we would play together. It was an opportunity to watch other people teach—and that was a big realization I had had, was that I had only watched other people teach when I was a student, and the experience of being a student is different from the experience of watching someone teach. Because as a student you remember the thing that, like, was your breakthrough, and you push to the stuff that warmed you up to get to the breakthrough. But as a teacher you go "Oh, duh! You had to do those four things." But also...so I would have various people teach an exercise and then the faculty would also play, so it was a two-fold thing. Like, we played together and that was always a good thing, but it's also really great to watch somebody else teach. And, Michael Gellman teaching "Playbook," which—again, one of those, it is played as a bad improv game, where, you know, I read a line [picks up script from desk] and then you treat me like I'm crazy. Right? The way Michael taught it—and again, going back to this idea that Spolin...when you think about the fact that Spolin's focus was on teaching people theatre skills, she wanted to use the games to teach acting. And, I think within that, and this is why improvisation for ASD is brilliant, this is why the sort of larger idea of improvisation as a mental health or social health issue has...its why, what you're doing, what the Spolin games are doing—again, when they're taught well—is they teach you how to break down recognizable human behavior. [Laughs] Does that make sense? You're literally learning how to behave like a human. That's what "Give and take focus" is. That's what...that's why we say the games teach themselves, because as you play you are discovering. So, again, I was like "Oh,"...Gellman was teaching this and the most important thing in "Playbook" isn't the justification—again taking it back to point of concentration—the point of concentration in "Playbook" is to respond to the tone to your partner's tone, and not to their words. Because language isn't important, behavior is important. So, so you do "Playbook" right, the person who has the lines is just as important as the person who's justifying, because I'm having to communicate to you through this dialogue that I have. Does that make sense?

**AG:** It does, yeah.



**AL:** And again, it was one of those like...of course! And why didn't I think of that? And for me that's one of the..."Freeze Tag" being another Spolin game that's—granted, when I first got here we called it "Switch," we did not call it "Freeze Tag," I remember getting told that. There was an audition where Mick Napier switched...he slipped and said "Switch" and I was the only other person in the room who knew what he was talking about, everyone else was like "What are you talking about?" But...you know, fundamentally, that game, which can be played at a whole bunch of different levels—but fundamental to that game is a, the point of concentration of that game is a transformation game. It is...and in fact its an object transformation game. The goal of that game should be to always have an object in your hand, so that when the next person comes in they can take that object and they transform that object, right, into the next scene. So its about transformation, not about jokes and not about justification. Which is another one of those where I think, you know...and again, I had a moment on a Second City ship where they were doing it—improvisers from a whole lot of different places, not all of them were Spolin trained, and we sort of like were running through, they do a fully-improvised game set, and they were, and somehow...I forget the situation. I sort of assumed that they had a level of familiarity, and I caught them—I came into the room and they were saying like "OK, well when you do this game," and they were just listing off tricks to each other and I was like "No! No, that's not what we do here. This is Second City, we do not just, you know, 'and when this happens you do this thing.'"

**AG:** It defeats the whole purpose of the game.

**AL:** And the thing from my perspective is, you can do these things from performance and maintain...sometimes maintaining the integrity of the game makes them so much easier—not sometimes, all the time—makes them so much easier to play. If you maintain the integrity in freeze tag of always having a physical object in your hand, and always making sure that when you tap in you, you take that exact physical position and transform it, its actually easier to play. And you don't have to...I remember hearing somebody saying "So, you're playing freeze tag, wave your arms around so they have an interesting position," and its like, no, if you have something, A, you will already have an interesting position, you know? Its so interesting to me...and you can play it like that.

**AG:** I've heard that line so many times. "Move around so they'll yell 'freeze.'"

**AL:** No, no. Whereas if you have something, they will have something to come in on. If you, physically, are always holding something—and again it teaches you to live in an environment because if you always have an object in your hand and you're living in an environment, there's always something going on, and then there's always something to transform. So, to me...there is a...there is a world of people in this...because we are always evolving and always asking ourselves questions and always saying, you know, "Should we be doing this?" and certainly as an instructor, I

have moved away—although this isn't Spolin either—I moved away...this is a while ago when I first started taking classes...there was a big emphasis on “don't say no.” The rules, the dialogue rules—Don't say no, don't ask questions, don't go into story, and that was like...don't play transaction scenes. And that was when I came in as Artistic Director we asked ourselves is that what we really want, and the answer's no. We have found that if you focus on the positive, focus on things to do rather than focusing on things not to do—and those rules have, you know, I don't agree completely. Mick Napier is like “no rules!” and I'm like [shrugs]. And there are rules, there are rules. There's really, I think, very interesting underlying rules, which goes back to that idea of fundamental agreement. On some level we have to be in a scene together and I have to take you in and you have to take me in. That's fundamental, and that's “yes, and.” And I actually really hate students who have really imbibe “Yes, and,” who do what I often refer to as like, bas “yes, and” scenes. “Yes, and let's go to the store!” You know? Nothing happened there.

**AG:** We're just listing things now, in a cheerful voice.

**AL:** Yes. In a very positive manner [laughs].

**AG:** It's better than arguing, I suppose.

**AL:** Yeah, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder. But you can argue, and you can argue if you are in that level of agreement, where you are...where you are listening and responding, right? So...so again, so we moved from this idea of the very rigid rules to what are the things you do, as opposed to what are the things you don't do. And then, eventually sort of said, “Notice when you're asking a lot of questions,” because that generally means that you're not taking responsibility for information in the scene, so that's an interesting red flag for you. Anyway, having said all of that—I think there's a tendency among improvisers—and we live in the moment, so—there tends to be a tendency among improvisers to think they created improv. And that the way improv is being done right now is the best way, and that there's an evolution of improvisation, so the Spolin stuff is old, you know? And I don't think so. I think, I think that improvisation for the theatre is a very dense, hard to...it's a dense thing that's very hard to...there's a very good word that I'm missing here.

**AG:** Infiltrate? No, that's not the word.

**AL:** No, that's not it. That's OK. But it's hard to understand objectively because it is tied to experiencing it in the reality. Very hard to know—to read it and say to yourself “Oh, yes, this is what this is.” In the same way—I actually feel the same way about, I'm very interested in Viewpoints, partially because it's got, it's doing a lot of the same things, but from a slightly different perspective. It's often being done by dancers who don't have a sense of humor, but that's a whole other thing [laughs].

**AG:** I'm inclined to agree [laughs].

**AL:** But I'm interested in it, and one of the things that I thought—I'm trying to find a time when I can go and take extended workshops in it—I can't access it...access was the word I was looking for.

**AG:** There it is.

**AL:** I can't access it just by reading. I'm like, I get it but I don't get it. And I think improvisation for the theatre is very similar to that. You have to do it and the techniques of side-coaching are very hard to understand purely through reading. And, back to what we said earlier, it's really easy to do badly. So I think a lot of people have experienced poorly-taught Spolin improvisation, and as a result are like, nope. So I think there's a world of people that...that's "I'm not interested in that, we're past that, that's boring, that's baby stuff." And for me, it really is the opposite. For me I think it is those fundamental...this is the stuff of long-form improvisation. This is the fundamental stuff...that's just that one thing. And it's easy, I think, for the people who are very interested in long-form to forget that Del Close did all of this stuff. Del Close spent forever immersed in Spolin improvisation, and for him—even though he was Del, so he had attitude...we're not saying Del didn't have attitude, Del had lots of attitude—but for him, all the long-form is based on a base of Spolin improvisation. And again, people look at the games and they think of the bastardization of the Spolin games that they've seen done by every horrible short-form troupe, you know? And again, it has to do with a lack of connection to the actual work that's being done. So, you see somebody to "Playbook" and you see them do it in the cheap cheesy way. Well, yeah, it seems like a lot of people standing, waiting to say their next funny line.

**AG:** "Grandma, you forgot your meds." That's always the line.

**AL:** [Laughs] Yes! Yes. Right. That's...and then if you see somebody do it the other way, all of a sudden you're like "Oh!" But it's very...it's not easy to see that. So, and it's weird because at a certain point...I think there's a lot we can learn from other foundational teachers of improvisation. I think there's a lot we can learn from Johnstone, I think status is one of the most useful, again, ways of breaking down recognizable human behavior, I think it fits really smoothly into my understanding of Spolin. Boal's games, which you know...go into a different direction because of what he's interested in, but a lot of Boal's games are connected to the same thing, to that same root, and the same root of playing a game. What are the rules? All of those things that are very fundamental to us as children, and I think that's why Spolin used them and why Neva Boyd used them—the idea of a game, the idea of play. I think all...I think there's something to be taken from all of those branches of learning, but I also feel really strongly that we're not *past* it, you know? Anytime someone says "Oh, we're past that," I get so...really? It's like saying you're past drawing, as an artist. No, drawing is drawing. [Laughs]. You know? You may do some forms of art

that don't involve drawing, but drawing itself isn't passé...[laughs]. Learning how to draw is not passé, it's not old fashioned, it's just drawing. And for me...as I said I'm coming from rehearsal for this show that I'm doing at Columbia, and this is—it's a devised piece using writing for the Algonquin Round Table—but, I've got an ensemble of 16 and I start rehearsals with "Pass the clap" and "give and take focus" and "stage picture" and some other things. First of all, "Pass the clap"—it's amazing how much you can learn about an ensemble and individuals, about their ability to do this [claps] and this [claps] and their inability sometimes. There's a girl who cannot clap at the same time as other people. She just can't. She's a sophomore theatre major, and if she does one, she can't do the next one. It's fascinating. That inability to do that I see that in her focus or her lack of focus during rehearsals—and it makes me think that she maybe has some form of ADD or something. But it's so interesting, because you're like, oh, that's that simple thing that shows up in everything else you do. Simultaneously, their ability as an ensemble to give and take focus with each other, all shows up then...it's the absolute base learning that then shows up in everything else we're doing. The fact that we've done it...it makes an enormous difference, just that we've done it. And I don't say "Apply this, do this," but the minute you do it, all of a sudden that awareness of everybody else in the space, all of a sudden it makes every thing that much easier. And I often...I, at a couple points have directed—I've got two kids, my son is now 17, my daughter is 12—and when my son was in grade school I co-directed a couple shows with his teacher. They go to the Waldorf school, which, you're right by there.

**AG:** Yeah, yeah.

**AL:** And there was a point, directing Nick's class when they were 10 or 11, when I was like "Oh! It's too late." [Laughs] I see where...if you're working with a group of kids, and you had played these games over time, then when you got to...what was the play they were doing? It was about Theseus and the Minotaur and all that...anyway. That, that at this point you could say to them "Give and take focus," and they would know what you were talking about. You play these games, and these games create these stage skills, that could then be applied to their...very clearly applied, "Oh, do this!" you know? "Stage picture"—we played that stage picture game, now play the "stage picture" game. But it would be something you would have to do over a long period of time and I did not do that. But even when I was directing them in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and the boy who played the lead, and the girl who played his girlfriend, they couldn't touch, and I was like "OK, we're gonna do the lines and we're gonna play 'touch to talk,' so you have to touch her." [Laughs].

**AG:** That's so helpful with the younger kids who won't want to...the word "boyfriend" or "husband" or "wife" freaks them out.

**AL:** Absolutely. But again, where it's...and this is again, going back to that great Spolin stuff, that point of concentration stuff...the only thing you have to do is just

say the lines, and when you talk you have to make physical contact. And, what did you discover doing that? You know? And all of a sudden they've started to create a physical language with each other. And it's very, very simple. It's not a concept, it's just something you do.

**AG:** It's a game.

**AL:** It feels like we've wandered to an end.

**AG:** It does! I've exhausted my questions, and I've taken up a lot of your time. Is there anything else you'd like to say, for posterity? [Laughs]

**AL:** [Laughs] Truly, I'm such a nerd for this stuff, this is my...my area of, like, I'm fascinated by how we improvise and how we teach improvisation. I've mentioned this multiple times, but I do think that Spolin is amazing, and I think the saddest part of Spolin is that Spolin isn't used as much, because people don't know how to access it—because it's so easy to teach badly, and they either have been burned by it or they look at it and go “Oh, that's impossible,” you know? “I don't know how to do that.”

**AG:** Thank you so much for your time.

**AL:** Absolutely.

Interviewee: Bina Martin  
 Interviewer: Ann Goodson  
 Date: 1/15/15  
 Place: The Second City Theater, Chicago, IL  
 Transcriber: Ann Goodson

**AG:** To start, I would love if you could describe how you ended up at Second City—what your experiences were with improv and writing.

**BM:** I came to Chicago right after college in '92, and I basically knew—I wanted to be an actor at the time—and I knew I wasn't ready for L.A. or New York. I had never set foot in Chicago but I had heard it was a great theatre town. I had actually applied here and in Minneapolis, too, at any theatres that had internships. There was a theatre at the time called Body Politic, and they accepted me as an intern, but I was like "good enough." My brother was also here at the same time, at the Lyric Opera, so we met up...so I came, I was auditioning for stuff and then I ran into a woman, and we were just talking, and she said "If I had it to do all over again, I would have gotten a job interning at an agency." So I called around all the local agencies—casting agencies—and an agency called Allied Artists said "Sure, come on in." So I started working for this woman, Colleen Gallagher, who represented tons of people from Second City—so, Jay Johnston, John Favreau, Pat McCartney, who brought in his roommate, Adam McKay—who, she was first was like "Nah, I don't think so" [laughs] but it worked out for him. So...David Koechner, so a lot of namey-names. Actually, Kate Walsh, she was there at the time. Anyway, so I'd always been terrified of improv, I didn't take it in college but I always went to see all the shows. She knew, she knew that I had an ulterior motive, that I was an actor, and she said "I'm going to send you out to auditions for improv," and I said "But I've never taken a class," and she was like "Go, go with Pat McCartney, and...just learn. Go have a drink with him—she was trying to set me up with him [laughs]—" "Just have a drink with him and it will help you with auditions." Well, obviously, Pat McCartney was not interested in me, so he sent his roommate, Adam McKay, and Adam McKay sat down and, like, explained "yes, and" and all this stuff that I had never heard. And then, on the audition...I don't think I got it...but it gave me a hunger for it and I started taking classes at Second City. So, at...at the time the A-E program existed but it wasn't as big a thing as it is now. It wasn't a prerequisite, so I was lucky enough to get right into Conservatory, and Donny Depollo as my first teacher. I never did have...Martin DeMaat, but he subbed a class for us. I had Norm, I had Michael Gellman, all those guys. I loved it...then went to iO after that and just got totally immersed in improv...until I kind of lost my acting roots, so then I went back to New York and went to...got my Masters at The Actors Studio, and while I was there—or, after I graduated that—I was going back and forth...I was dating somebody in Chicago at the time [laughs] so I talked to Kelly Leonard about teaching in New York, they had kind of an outpost at the time, it was called...they called it Virtual Second City because it was where they would basically just rent rooms, classrooms

there and have classes. So I started teaching improv in New York, at their Second City, before I even came here. And a few years later I came here to Anne and said “Hey, I’ve already been teaching for you guys,” so I started teaching. That was in 2002?

**AG:** And Anne is Anne Saviano?

**BM:** No, sorry, Anne Libera. She’s the head of Columbia...Comedy Studies, she was the head of A-E at the time.

**AG:** So did you do any performing for Second City?

**BM:** Yeah.

**AG:** Could you talk about that?

**BM:** Well...so I did Bizco, and I still do Bizvo stuff. I didn’t do a ton of...I don’t know, when I came back I mostly came back, well I thought I was coming back as an actor, and then I ended up teaching and directing. So, the first thing I...I was asked to do the, what they now call the Coached Ensembles. So I came up with “Chairs,” this like, kind of...this thing that we did for years and years after that, so I performed with them, we went to Edinboro and Dublin and got...but no, I was never on a stage. I auditioned for Touring Company a couple times before I left, and after I had gotten Actors Studio, I was invited to an audition and Kelly Leonard was like “What are you gonna do if you get it?” and I was like, this is so typical Second City—I’m leaving now you want me. But, it didn’t end up being a conflict [laughs].

**AG:** Can you explain what Bizco is?

**BM:** It’s...used to be Second City Communication, but now it’s...shoot, they just changed their name. Second City Works, it’s now called. It is...a bunch of things. Basically it reaches out to corporations that either want to have a retreat or some kind of, if they’re celebrating their CEO or whatever kind of...can’t remember the word right now, but basically they’ll do—so, we do a bunch of things. Sometimes we’ll do custom performances for them, again, either to celebrate the CEO or if they’re like “We’re working on management being authoritative, or sales, blah blah blah,” we’ll write sketches for them, and perform them for them to teach that. We also do workshops, so we’ll teach basically what we’re teaching in A-E, to hit those specific skills. So, we’ll do, like, furniture sales...we do a lot of...just teaching workshops.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit about your experiences as a writer?

**BM:** Sure. It’s all...my intro was most of the thing [laughs]. But basically, Mary Scruggs brought me in. I had been teaching in the improv program and I was

teaching in A-E and the Conservatory and doing a lot of directing, and Mary Scruggs was like “You should...teach for the writing program,” and I was like “I don’t even write sketches really—or sometimes, for Bizco type stuff,” but I wasn’t really a writer, I didn’t consider myself that at all. She’s like “Well, I’ll start you—ironically—in Writing Five and Six, because that’s more directing and editing.” So, I remember her talking me through, like, literally, like how—I had never done anything [laughs]. But, I did, and then I started doing more in the Writing program and now its basically all I do. So, I think a year into that I was like “I should probably be able to write my own stuff as well,” so I wrote the show called *The Parent Crap*. Did you see that?

**AG:** Yeah, I saw it.

**BM:** Yeah, so...yeah, so I do a lot more sketch writing that way. And now I also work for my mom, who writes a column called *Miss Manners*...my brother and I each wrote a book with her and we contribute to the column every now and then.

**AG:** Didn’t you—am I making it up that you did some writing for Conan?

**BM:** Acting. When I was in New York...Kevin Dorff was on the staff...so they, yeah, they put me in a few sketches. Yeah, the whole writing thing is only like, six or seven years old.

**AG:** OK, my questions are jumping around a bit. Can you talk a little bit about what your perspective is on sort of the purpose of Second City? Why it exists—in terms of serving students and in terms of creating a product for audiences to consume.

**BM:** So, both the training center and the theatres?

**AG:** Yeah.

**BM:** I mean, the training center—each, well, let’s just talk improv first. So, the A-E program I think has become something that is accessible to everyone. I mean, the Conservatory is for people who want to be on a stage. So that kind of appeals to the 20-somethings who just, are doing this purely to get stage time. Also, but not—the A-E, when I was coming up, was a little bit remedial, and now it’s a requirement. When I started teaching, I started loving teaching A-E, purely because it appealed to a much broader audience. And I think—Bizco certainly preaches this—but, the principles of improv apply to every aspect of your life, you know? Life is improv [laughs] but its teaching you to trust your instincts, to maybe not use your first or second instinct after a while, to...socially adapt, to make life...to be able to diffuse a situation, you know, it’s basically life skills. I remember, I always teach in the summer, teenagers, too, and I always say “I wish I did this in high school,” because I did a lot of theatre and was a big theatre geek, and I did OK in it, but—there’s still



that hierarchy in a play, and improv is just...everything that people don't want high school to be, which is supporting each other—I mean, everything that people *do* want high school to be—supporting each other. Time after time you'll see the 13-year-old, 14-year-olds, where the girls are like six feet tall and the boys are four feet tall...time and time again, the beautiful, popular one who you know is killing it in high school will be taken down a peg, and the nerdy, little, tiny boy or girl who is funny is the one that they all flock to, and it just is a great equalizer, socially, because it makes you use skills that you can actually hone as opposed to just being popular. And that's the high school version, but I think that definitely applies, and you see so many people who are like “No, I'm scared,” in those situations, and then...they do better in those situations. So, that's the training center [laughs].

**AG:** It was a really broad question! [Laughs].

**BM:** The impact of the theatres?

**AG:** Yeah, what's Second City's purpose in terms of creating satirical content? How do you feel about that?

**BM:** How do I feel about that? [Laughs]. I mean, its...you know, another thing I preach in class is that you ideally want to exist on two levels—on having a strong point of view and also being silly and goofy—I think *Saturday Night Live*—Which, I'm far from criticizing *Saturday Night Live*—it usually hits on the silly and goofy and once in a while it hits on the level of having a point of view and really impacting the country. Which it has, I always say Sarah Palin...the whole Tina Fey thing totally changed the conversation in America. It has that ability. And Second City strives—is not always successful, but strives—to always hit those two levels and always have a point of view, and Matt Hovde likes to say “funny, and” so its not just for laughs, but it makes people think. And, you know, its still a tourist attraction, while being extremely accessible—its still a tourist attraction but it makes people think, sometimes uncomfortably so [laughs] which, its willing to take those risks that I don't think commercial TV has the ability to do. So, yeah, did that answer?

**AG:** No, that's really helpful. Can you talk a little bit about the satirical content of a typical Second City review, and what that looks like?

**BM:** Yeah. We always—again, unlike *Saturday Night Live*, which I don't think anybody is pitted against, but still—we don't do a lot of parody, and so the satire of course is relevant and current but it...when we do our political satire it's more nation and worldwide trends as opposed to...you know, whatever they just did on the Oscars, they called it “poop” or whatever.

**AG:** I didn't see it [laughs].

**BM:** Oh, [laughs] when they announced, there's a guy named Dick Pope and they called him "Dick Poop" or something. So, I feel like that's gonna be, if *Saturday Night Live* is airing this week, that's going to be a thing. We don't physically have the ability to be up, to change our shows every week, but it also I think, affords us the opportunity to—there are shows from the 50s that have scenes that we still read that are still relevant. So...yes, it certainly follows trends in the way the world works, but the world doesn't change that much. Or, it goes in generational changes, so I think our political satire tries to cover, you know, how the world is feeling—the temperature of the world as opposed to what happened yesterday in terms of politics and stuff. That's kind of a vague answer, too.

**AG:** No, that's really helpful. Can you think at all—this is a mean question—but can you think of any sketches that are quintessential Second City, in your mind?

**BM:** Yeah, I can. Well, a controversial one now is "Gump," because now, as you're familiar with, it has the word "retarded" in it, so now they don't tour with that anymore. But I use it in all my classes and we walk about it, we use it as a talking point—is it acceptable to use this word? When is it OK to use this word? When is it protected, when is it not? So I...but I think that one is one that lives on those two levels of being hilarious but also making a point about corporate structure, and also making a universal point about corporate structure, which I don't think will ever change, it will always be a system of "who do you know?" What else...there's a really dumb one [laughs] that I adore from an ETC review with Jack McBrayer and Sue Gillan, and Angela Shelton, actually—and its Dave Pompeii, and they're nannies, and they've got these two little white kids, and they're playing—you know it?

**AG:** I've seen it, yeah [laughs].

**BM:** I just think its hilarious, just because its so stupid, but it also definitely makes a point, which is "these are the people who are raising your kids." I think one of the lines is like, "She doesn't need German, I taught her everything she knows," and she makes Sue Gillan say—you know it, but—she makes Sue Gillan say "Baby girl, who are you?" and she's like "Somebody!"... "And what do you do?"... "Taking care of my business," [laughs]. And its just...I don't know, I just love it because it definitely makes a point, but its also stupid. What else? The chair ballet I think is hilarious. What else? One that made me extremely uncomfortable, but I recognize the value in it—I'm not a huge fan of messing-with-the-audience scenes, but in like, two reviews ago, Katie Rich did one where she made people bid on a suggestion. Do you know that one?

**AG:** No.

**BM:** So, just to get a suggestion for an improv scene she made people bid on it. And she...the point was that this is how politics work, so she ended up taking a suggestion

and...people paid actual money, like, they paid actual cash. And I paid money because I was behind...there was a guy behind me who was, like, this was there anniversary and he didn't win...and I think she took people's money no matter what [laughs] I'm not sure, and then just kept it, and then said afterwards "we're contributing this all to Planned Parenthood," and that was the point—we're contributing this all to Planned Pregnancy, or, Planned Parenthood...whatever, same thing...and she was like "Welcome to how politics works right now, you give your money thinking that you're getting one thing and you get something else. So, it made its point but it made me supremely uncomfortable because it involved actual money and disappointment...but it definitely made its point. And I do think that that's what live theatre should be, that's not *my* favorite, but that it should make people uncomfortable in a fairly safe way—like, nobody lost more than \$20—in a fairly safe way making your audience think.

**AG:** Can you think of anything that actually did cross that line into abusing the audience?

**BM:** I think that's my...that's the closest. No, I don't think we generally...there was one where they googled somebody at the beginning of the show and then used their information. Which is a little uncomfortable, but also it's so easy to do, like, it's not...no, I think Second City is usually on the right side of that. There was one [laughs] again I don't think this necessarily crossed a line, but...it worried audiences. The...when Shelly Gossman and Michael Pat O'brien—Pat O'brien, he goes by now—pretended that they were getting engaged onstage, and then the next, like, it seemed like it was a real proposal...and they had really dated, nobody in the audience knew that, but...and then the next couple of scenes, they, it was just really uncomfortable because she had said "no," [laughs]. I had a student who was working in the box office and she said for months after people would be like "Is that—are they OK?" [laughs] but again, that's not hurting anybody. I'm just not—it's an age old tradition, messing with the audience—but I, it's always made me uncomfortable, because, first of all I don't want to be messed with. I'm there to...I'm not...you can't deny that this is a paying audience that came to see you so if you abuse them...but again, I don't think it's ever been abuse, it's just not my favorite.

**AG:** I'm in the same camp. Because of the opening to...*Psychopath*? Where they pretend to start a fight, they pick a fight with somebody in the audience. But it's a plant.

**BM:** Yeah, but it's Jon Glaser.

**AG:** Yeah, I remember watching that and being really uncomfortable.

**BM:** Yeah, and again that one is safe because it's not an actual audience member. But, yeah. "Toe" is another one of my favorite scenes, with Rachel Dratch and Scott Adsit, where—you don't know it?

**AG:** I don't know it.

**BM:** To me it's such an example, I use it as an example of...theatrics, you know, using live theatre as opposed to...so you don't know what you're seeing always. That's what I call the luxury and the privilege of live theatre or sketch theatre, is you don't know what you're seeing. So the scene starts with it's dark, and there's thunder and Rachel Dratch is just sitting there and her car won't start, and Scott Adsit comes up and says "Roll your window down" and she's like "I don't think I should" and he's like "No, come on, roll it down, I'll help," and she does and he shoots her like five times. And then it flips back, and he's like "Roll your window down!" and you realize that was in her imagination, but they keep flipping between, like, him being totally innocent and her imagination—what we find out is her imagination—and like, she gets raped, like...but, it's all safe because...I mean, two guys come in and it says in the script "take their turns" with her, but it's all safe because, the humor is like...she says something about getting the car started and he says "I'm not qualified to do that but I can jump on top of you and chop off all your hair and..." you know? And, because it's a little bit perverse, what she's thinking, you feel OK to laugh. And you find that out pretty quickly, so it's still protected, but it's definitely still...you know, I always scare my Writing One students on the first day. Although, did we not read it?

**AG:** I don't think we did. I haven't read it.

**BM:** We read that, "Gump," and "Babysitter," and I say that these all, on paper, sound like horrible ideas for scenes, but they're protected. The line that we're always trying to ride is taking risks and being a little bit scary but making your audience feel safe.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit more about how—because I would imagine that's the challenge, is wanting to challenge your audience but not wanting to abuse them, like you said—so how do you think that Second City manages to walk that line? What's the process?

**BM:** Yeah, I think it's just all the skill of satire. It's making fun of themselves first. It drives me crazy, but I understand the need for it—whenever there's an actor of color, right out the gate, they always make a joke about "Hey guys, I'm an actor of color," so that...and, I read once, a theory about that, that comedy is about appealing to the highest...or the most common denominator, and, unfortunately, our audiences, being anything other than white is not the most common denominator, so there's this need to break through that and be like "Hey guys, it's safe, I know..." which is an

awful thing to do. And when a couple years ago we finally had two black actors they were like “freedom!” because they could finally do scenes, you know, about...as opposed to “I’m the only black guy in the room.” So, I think a lot of that, a lot of it is race relations. I’m forgetting the question...

**AG:** I forgot it, too. [Laughs] Just, how do you walk that line.

**BM:** Yeah, right. Well, I think the very nature of satire—which is, “I’m this thing, but you’re gonna see yourself in me”—so I’m gonna make fun of myself and trying to seem hip and cool, but secretly racist, do you see yourself in that? So...I think it’s very frank about that. There was a scene also a couple years ago that had the two black actors, and two white guys and they were watching baseball and—you know this one? The n-word one?

**AG:** I do.

**BM:** And, I have always loved, he was like “I don’t feel comfortable having a conversation where I don’t get to say one of the words.” But, it just, you know...we all, you know, comedy equals truth plus surprise, and I think we can all relate to that. Which is why messing with the audience makes me uncomfortable, because that’s saying “You are this, and we’re going to bring you in” as opposed to having the safety of that fourth wall where you can say “You recognize yourself, but I’m not gonna call you out right now about it.”

**AG:** That’s a really good way to articulate it. The baseball scene was *South Side of Heaven*, right?

**BM:** Yep.

**AG:** Unrelated, that was the first Second City show I ever saw. I came up on Spring Break and was like “If this is what they do, this is the building I want to be in.” Then I started looking for apartments. OK, I’m especially interested since you have a background in theatre—actual theatre—I’m interested in what your perspective is on how improv and sketch fits into the bigger picture of theatre.

**BM:** Unfortunately, I feel like it’s still a separate thing. When I went to The Actors Studio, I felt that—although I loved Second City and iO—I felt that I had lost my legitimate theatre roots, which I hate that that’s the term for it. But I always thought I was a better actor than I was an improviser...I hadn’t done writing yet, at that point. But yeah...so, I always, when I taught Improv for Actors, I talk about how yes, there’s this weird division between improv and actors, and after going to The Actors Studio, I saw actors who were brilliant and doing their sense memory and could cry on command and all these great things, but, you know, God forbid something went wrong, or somebody tripped up on a line, they froze. So I always say you can correct

any of the negative things in each of them—but then I saw improvisers who weren't playing a truthful moment, and were just playing for laughs and superficial characters, so...I think there should be more of a...and I think we're getting better actors. It used to be that I felt that Scott Adsit was the only one who was as good of an actor as he was an improviser...I don't think that's true anymore. We always used to say that people were either better actors or better improvisers, it was hard to get both. But as far as our place here, in Chicago or in the world...yeah, I'm so immersed in it now, and I never did become immersed in the theatre world here, so I don't know if it still looks down on us. But I think, I think it's just considered a different beast. Like how plays and musicals are different, or improv and sketch comedy. I would still argue we don't always hit, but what we are striving for is something that is to be reckoned with, that it's not just parody and commercials, but we are trying to have a political voice within theatre. We always get nominated for Jeff Awards, so [laughs]. But yeah, I don't personally feel as much that it's a step down, which is how I used to feel, like "Well, this is real theatre, this will be fun and this will help me with my real acting," but I definitely feel that its sort of an art form in its own.

**AG:** What sort of lead you to shift?

**BM:** Being so immersed in it, it being my livelihood right now. I mean, I've seen lots of plays that have rocked my world, but...but when you get a sketch that does that, and you're laughing, you know? There's...to me, there's nothing better than that.

**AG:** So, shifting a little but more to the historical roots of Second City—whatever knowledge you have of this is fine, it's not a quiz—can you talk a little bit about how you think Second City's work has changed over the years? If it has.

**BM:** Yeah, I...in the best way possible, I don't think it has. I mean obviously we've modernized, we've updated, every director comes in, wants to try something new, but then...I feel like, like the rest of the world, it's generational, and that...you know, when Mick Napier came in and iO was getting big, he did sort of a Harold-type show with *Paradigm Lost*...and then it kind of shifted back to doing a more traditional, Second City-style with like...we started with three blackouts, and then introducing the chairs, and all that. And then it shifts again. So, there's slight internal things, but again, I think the best testament is that we're still reading sketches from 40 or 50 years ago that still seem relevant. So, like I said, in the best possible way I don't think it's changed that much—it updates and gets fresh faces, and it will always be a little bit ageist, but...

**AG:** Can you talk about that? Is there something about the kind of work that Second City does that lends itself to wanting, like, 28-year-olds in suits?

**BM:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's the same thing—shouldn't be, but it's the same kind of thing as the "most common denominator." Our audiences are generally young. It...yeah, I mean, it's a weird uncomfortable thing that I think...it's hard to start a comedy career later in life. You can certainly have longevity and build up your credibility, but we have tons of students—I think there's even a senior citizens class devoted to that—but, inevitably, there's always an older person in the class who's like "I'm the oldest person in the room," and feels like they need to apologize for that. They're certainly, in writing it doesn't matter. And it shouldn't in acting either, but it's just, you know, a young person's game. Unfortunately.

**AG:** That's fair. I would imagine that being the oldest person in the room is similar to being, like, one of three girls in the class. Or the one girl in the ensemble.

**BM:** Or the one person of a different race.

**AG:** The one person of color, yeah. Absolutely.

**BM:** I love that, like—what's her name? The new woman on *Saturday Night Live* is like 46 or 47. That makes me happy.

**AG:** Yeah! I can't remember her name...but she's the oldest person to be added to the cast, like, in history.

**BM:** Really? Because Darrell Hammond was the oldest, but he was there already.

**AG:** Yeah, but he was added when he was younger. So, yeah, I was reading, she's the oldest person to ever be added.

**BM:** That makes me happy.

**AG:** I'm going to have to look up her name and put an asterisks next to this when I transcribe it or whatever. [Laughs]. OK, it's not a quiz, but...can you talk a little bit about whatever knowledge you have of the foundational, I don't know, the history of Second City? I'm focusing my attention on Hull House, but are you familiar with that at all?

**BM:** I don't have a ton—I know the University of Chicago and Compass Players and Viola Spolin, and Paul Sills...Mike Nichols and Elaine May I think is the best example of stuff that is still so current and so...Del Close, started with them as well. Which, this isn't really that, but to me it's always hilarious whenever there's this huge competitiveness between iO and Second City because they're all doing the same damn thing, [laughs] and it's most of the same people and the same teachers, and it was the same foundation, the exact same...and I know that the legendary argument between Del Close and Sheldon Patinkin actually, about whether improv—Del Close

argued that improv can be a product, and Sheldon Patinkin, I believe this is accurate, always argued that it was a means-to.

**AG:** To sketch.

**BM:** Yeah. I think both those things are true [laughs]. I mean, I just read Amy Poehler's book, and how they started UCB, I mean, it's basically the same thing, how just a couple of people were like "Hey, let's start a tiny, little theatre and do what we want to do." So, that's about the extent of my knowledge.

**AG:** No, that's great. Do you use Viola Spolin in class at all?

**BM:** Not in writing. I did when I was teaching in improv. I mean...yeah, I think all the exercises are—whether they are actually the same names as what she started out—are all inspired by her.

**AG:** Is there anything particular of hers that you use in class? This is me being mean, this part is a quiz.

**BM:** I don't really teach improv anymore [laughs]. Well, I guess I teach the kids' improv. I would have to look back through her book. I'm sorry.

**AG:** No, not a problem.

**BM:** "Kitty wants a corner!" I still teach that. That's the old Viola Spolin.

**AG:** Which one?

**BM:** "Kitty Wants a Corner," it's an improv warm-up. She called it "Pussy Wants a Corner," [laughs] but it's been updated. But that's Viola Spolin. It's just silly....I start almost every beginning improv class with it. It's just a stupid game where one person stands in the middle and you say "Kitty wants a corner" and say "see my neighbor" and you go to the next person, and meanwhile people are trying to steal spaces. It just gets people laughing and gets people taking a risk...and I use it also in, like, making eye contact and taking a risk. There's nothing really to be gained in it, and my favorite thing is once I taught it to a bunch of teenagers and they were like, "Well, if we're gonna have to be in the middle, why would we move?" And, to me, that's like...you just answered the conundrum that is every improv thing ever—why do anything? [Laughs] But, we're here to take risks, with little or no pay-off sometimes, but...so, I'm not sure what her formal description of what it is...but, I think the whole foundation of doing a couple warm-ups and getting people laughing, that whole sense of getting out of your head is all her.



**AG:** Can you talk a little bit more about what you see is...what you perceive is the role of play in improvisation?

**BM:** Yeah, it's everything. But, to me, you get on the first day, with new improvisers, where you can tell—oh, somebody in your office thought you were funny. So there's this idea that in improv anything goes. And so, my Dad loves to quote this, I don't know why...but, I don't laugh, for the first three classes. Like, [laughs] which, I don't know that it's true, and it kind of makes me sound like a dick, but...but, I always say, "don't try to be funny, I'm sure you guys are funny, but..." and so, while play is everything, and freedom is everything, it's organized chaos. And it's this idea that—I once had a teacher ask me, "what do you do in the first class when someone is cursing a lot? When you're supposed to tell them that everything is right, and I'm like, "I never tell them that everything is right." I'm saying...I want them to use their instincts and not censor themselves, but that said, there's a built in censorship so that you're also protecting other people and not assaulting other people with your words and ideas, etc. So, you know, it needs to be a safe place, and I think that's why we have rules, and I...so, it's that balance between organized chaos and playing within the rules. And then you can break them, absolutely, but, so...and I used to teach preschool and then do improv at night, so I would joke that I used to teach kids to act like adults and adults to act like kids. But, every, you know kids have the most freedom in the world and can be so creative, but only when they feel safe and have boundaries. And not in a restrictive way when it comes to improv, but just so that you're protecting everyone else's right to play and have fun and not infringe on that. Which is—the quickest way to shut someone else down is if you're assaulting them with offensive words or ideas, so...yeah, so obviously play is huge, but I almost equally emphasize safe play.

**AG:** Safe play, yeah. That seems really consistent with the work that Spolin was doing at Hull House...that was a lot of what she espoused was taking care of each other and being safe, so it's interesting to see that still exist.

**BM:** Well, and this teacher who asked me about it in Level A was like—that's why I don't teach Level A anymore [laughs]—Anne was like, "I'm gonna put you in Level C through E" and I was like, "Yeah, OK." Ironically, I love teaching early levels of writing. But, yeah, I was never good at being like "Everything you do is right!" because I'm more of an editor, and I was like, "Great, I love that you had that instinct. Next time, maybe try doing it this way, so that you don't...you know, poop on someone else's idea."

**AG:** That makes sense. Can you talk at all about if you see Second City taking any steps to maintain a connection to its historical roots?

**BM:** I mean, yeah...I'm sure it's no different from any other place, but it seems like we keep losing people. And, I mean—these aren't hard things, necessarily—but the

Mary Scruggs Festival... The Skybox is named after Donny Depollo, and so I think we have these constant reminders—those are a little more recent, and iO does it with the Del Close Theatre—so, while everybody might not be familiar with these names personally, I think... you know, like everything, all the teachers who knew these people, we're always bringing up these names and so... my past is Mary Scruggs and Donny Depollo, but, you know, Michael Gellman's past *is*... and actually, I was taught by Del Close at iO, but, you know an older teacher is citing people that they grew up with. So I think we all make an effort to keep reminding ourselves of the people that came before us... like I said, I don't think the nature of our shows is that different from when the theatre, you know, was recent... we could expand to a thousand seat theatre, you know, and I think we could fill it, but our roots are in a smallish, accessible theatre, that the audience feels like they are part of that experience as opposed to watching it from a distance.

**AG:** Can you comment at all on a connection, if you think there is one, between improvisation and teaching?

**BM:** Improv itself, and teaching anything, or teaching improv?

**AG:** I think teaching anything.

**BM:** Yeah, I mean, going back to “life is improv”... for me personally, my roots in acting—and even when I started doing improv, especially when I started doing improv—I only felt comfortable doing an accent or doing a physicality, or doing anything that wasn't me, because I was a 20-something, and like most 20-somethings I didn't know who I was, so it was easy to adapt, and I had, you know, an ability to do those accents and stuff, and that made the idea of doing... the idea of doing improv, the reason it scared me was because I had to use my own intelligence and my own instincts, terrified me... but if I did an accent and I was an Englishman then I could kind of say anything. And so for me, yeah, I don't think I could have been a teacher if I hadn't learned improv because it helped me find the character of me. Like, when we teach improv we talk about character work, and yes, you will definitely do the crazy, over-the-top characters, but even if it's just to introduce a game, you have to know how to play you, and be, like, the ten version of you. And so now when I improvise I almost always kind of play myself [laughs] and I try to do both. You have to practice it. So, yeah, I think just the universal ability improv gives you to just kind of be at peace with your self and what your instincts are helps you. I think also just getting older helps, too [laughs] where it's like “I don't give a shit anymore, I'm going to tell you exactly what I think.” But being able to say that—improv has also taught me how to do that as a teacher, in a kind way, to find a way to joke with students and be like “yeah, that's unacceptable, but I want you to hear what I'm saying and not make you and everybody else uncomfortable.” It's kind of honed my ability to give feedback in a kinder way, I hope, and to use humor to do that, but also to cut to the quick and say what I want to say.

**AG:** Can you talk a little about Mary Scruggs and your relationship with her?

**BM:** Sure. Oh! Wait, there was another thing.

**AG:** Sure, sure.

**BM:** I had a good friend who was a bartender, and we were like—of course I think everybody who's in a Second City class had someone who was like "You're so funny, you should take improv classes," and I'm like "I do eight shows a week," and I feel like that as a teacher, I was always from the age of 12 doing shows regularly and performing in professional theatres, and I very rarely now do. But I feel with teaching that I'm doing eight shows a week, where it's like that's a kind of performance.

**AG:** Teaching is a performance.

**BM:** Yeah. Anyway, Mary Scruggs. Amazing...just, yeah, I don't know. There aren't enough good enough—not enough great things to say about her. I've never been able to fully articulate this when I've hosted the Festival, when we talk about her, but she was one of those people who you knew when she was living how amazing she was. It wasn't just like "Oh, this sucks, now let's think of all the great qualities," you know? I remember, like a week before she died, I went to a faculty meeting, and Tyler Dean Kempf has just started in the writing program, and we were both waiting to talk to her, and I was like, "Isn't she amazing?" and he was like, "Yes, she's the best," like, who says that about people while they're still around? [Laughs] You know? I mean, you do, you hope, but you just had this feeling—she was just the perfect combination of absolutely frank and cutting and biting, but in the sweetest possible way. You know? And just...she just exuded...you just wanted to be around her all the time. I took a class from her myself when I was in the writing program and we bonded...but just, yeah. Spike talked about this at the tech rehearsal, but she was just so about, like the fact that she was like "You, writing program," when, I didn't know some basic, like, what "Clash of Context" was, I was having to fake it during my first class, and now that's basically all I do, and I never would have gotten that. God knows what she saw, if she saw anything, but she always just had this ability to want to help people do the next thing. So, I mean, she's everything in terms...again, that intro I gave at the thing where, I literally use that every day, "What do we like, what confused you, what do you want to see more of," it's such a constructive way to give feedback that's never pandering.

**AG:** It's interesting the way you describe her as being biting but also very, very sweet, is sort of the same way we were describing Second City earlier, of walking that line.

**BM:** Yeah, yeah. She definitely epitomized, I think, what we're trying to do. And I love that it was always with her cute, little circle skirts and her headbands and she just...butter would melt in her mouth. But again she would...[laughs] she would say stuff to Norm that, like, *nobody* could say that to Norm.

**AG:** Like what?

**BM:** [Laughs] Oh, like about his love life and stuff. She would just cut to it, but, like, but then with this big smile. She just...it was amazing. The latest thing that I'm upset about, I think I was telling you, is we're applying to the Disney School, and there's this weird, like...it's a, one of the CPS school, and it's a weird school and technology is their focus and so everything is kind of done behind a screen and they have these giant, giant rooms where all eight kindergartens are in this giant room...and that's how the school was build, there's no philosophy behind it. But I read, as was standing up to talk about her, that she went to the Disney School, and so I was like "Fuck, one of the 500 things I wish I could talk to her about," because she might be our only chance, might be our best chance of getting into the school.

**AG:** Can you talk at all about the kind of work that she did?

**BM:** I'm very sad that I never got to see her one woman show, so I really only got to know her as a teacher. But...yeah, I know she wrote a book with Gellman and...yeah, like I said, I really only knew her as a teacher in the class that I took with her and as the head of the writing department, but...yeah, she made an incredibly appealing place to be and set all the foundations that are still doing an amazing job. I think she created the writing department, so. Is there footage anywhere of her one woman show?

**AG:** I don't know, do you remember what it's called?

**BM:** I can't remember...I think something with motorcycles.

**AG:** I'll find it. I'll look for it...did she have any particular Mary philosophy of Second City or writing or satire?

**BM:** Yeah, I mean, everything I think that we teach to this day. Those two levels, the point of view and the crazy funny, silly stuff. She just kind of embodied all the stuff—everything, I think you know, as the writing department, she created that.

**AG:** That's very helpful...because I can't interview her, which is very sad.

**BM:** Did you know her at all?

**AG:** No, no.

**BM:** She was before you came to Second City.

**AG:** When did she pass away?

**BM:** It was four years ago.

**AG:** Yeah, I wasn't in the city yet.

**BM:** This was...I think this was the third festival, or the fourth? She died in, I want to say, March or April. It was...my daughter was born, so I think it was early 2011. So it's four years. Because that February was the first festival, so its been four festivals but it's only been four and some change since she died.

**AG:** In my mind I thought it was farther away.

**BM:** Again, it's just...its so particular to our world, but it's so weird, like Jason Chin, did you know him at all?

**AG:** I didn't, no.

**BM:** I mean, same kind of thing where it's just like, what? They were the same age, too, they were both 46. And with her, I mean, check this but I think it was a brain aneurism, she didn't have any history...I think Jason did have some heart issues, but just that kind of...weird, it just shakes you to the core. Like, no, that can't happen out of nowhere.

**AG:** No, I never got the chance to meet her, but I'm really grateful for that festival.

**BM:** Yeah, well, one thing...I love encouraging people and encouraging women in particular, which is certainly still not as much of a presence in the writing department. I did...I don't know if you want to quote me on this because it's not a popular idea, but I did talk to Richard that first year, where—certainly she did encourage females, but it always, never quite did sit quite right with me, and Richard agreed with me on this, about it being *the woman*, you know? About it being...I think she lived in a world that I like to live in, like, yeah it sucks that there are fewer of us, but you kind of pretend that we all have the same opportunities and the cream will rise to the top. So, she wasn't specifically about women writers, she was about writers, and if you were a woman, awesome, but she wasn't...and I think the first time I hosted the festival I made a joke about this, but it wasn't really true...that she wasn't really about writing about the female experience, but every scene in that first one was about pregnancy and about being a girlfriend, and whatever. So...I love that the opportunity is there but part of me kind of just wishes that it could be just a festival in

her honor as opposed to...I mean, I think it gets more publicity and I think it's a more unique thing to have it this way, but I'm not sure that specific thing was her legacy.

**AG:** Interesting. OK, I've exhausted my questions, thank you so much for letting me interview you!

**BM:** My pleasure! Best of luck transcribing all this.

Interviewee: Rachael Mason  
 Interviewer: Ann Goodson  
 Date: 1/15/15  
 Place: The Second City Theater, Chicago, IL  
 Transcriber: Ann Goodson

**AG:** I would love to start with your history of improvisation, and sort of what brought you to here. Kind of your origin story, I guess.

**RM:** [Laughs] Sure, I was a theatre kid, and I did lots of shows and plays and my mother was a music teacher and my grandma was an opera singer and my brother was an opera singer so...and we're Sicilian, so, always a show at the dinner table. [Laughs] So I went to this little liberal arts college in upstate New York, where I was studying Shakespeare, and it turned out that David Miner, who produces *Parks and Rec*, and *30 Rock*, and *Brooklyn 99*, he had founded my college improv troupe. And because he was super fucking motivated, he started the national college comedy festival and brought in all these great people. So I learned long-form improvisation there—well, short-form first—and then I knew that I had to, after I graduated, go to the place where it was invented. And lucky enough, those people—some of those people—were still alive. So, I realized that I didn't have to write plays, I could improvise them, and [I] hauled ass to Chicago. And, now, I started taking classes at all the places and performing at all the places and then I landed here. So, what drew me to Chicago was, well, I just knew there was no place on earth that did what we did. And I'm a New Yorker, too...*Saturday Night Live* is there, *Comedy Broadway*, but I knew you had to come here even if I wanted to go back there.

**AG:** What was the name of your college?

**RM:** Skidmore College.

**AG:** OK. I would love to hear more about what you did in college, with learning short-form and then moving on to long-form.

**RM:** Sure. Well, [groans] sophomore year and my mother was dying, and I was a fucking mess, and a friend of mine was like “you're funny, come with me to my college improv troupe rehearsal thing” and I had a ball just watching them and then I auditioned and then I got in, and it probably saved my life. Like, putting my head in a bucket and waiting for someone to tag me out or doing “Panel of Experts” or whatever fucking short-form game, like for three hours a week I got to be anyone but me and , like, play. So you know we learned [improv] from books, like we had Truth In Comedy and Something Wonderful Right Away and somebody had a Spolin book someplace, so we started, you know, we did short-form. And then we thought we were doing long-form [laughs] but I didn't really, like I didn't realized that we

weren't doing short-form until I got [to Chicago]. It's like when you realize that college sort of counts, but not really [laughs].

**AG:** Right, I know the feeling.

**RM:** Right.

**AG:** So now, as a teacher, do you feel like—because lots of teachers start with short-form and then build to long-form—do you feel like that's a good progression?

**RM:** I started as a straight actor; singing, dancing, acting, plays, memorizing lines. So, to me, it was just a chance to get to write my own lines. I was a hard core theatre kid so improv just seemed like a chance to screw around. Short-form to me was like skill games, I'll show you how reference heavy I can be, I'll show you I can nail the genres. And then long-form was just a chance to give that breath—I don't think they're different things, I think they're the same things, same muscles different technique. Like, short-form is direct and immediate use of the suggestion and long-form is a little more deconstructive and searching.

**AG:** That's a really nice way to articulate it. Do you have—so you mentioned reading a Spolin book, and I feel like a Spolin book is always sort of around an improv ensemble—

**RM:** Always. Always.

**AG:** Did you do any specific research on her in undergrad or elsewhere?

**RM:** So I was [sic] methody—I did *Viewpoints* with Anne Bogart and Stanislavski, like you name it, Adler, Strasberg, because I'm a New Yorker, too, like, you know, all that crap. So, like, Meisner repetition, listen and respond, be in the moment, all that was in me already [from my training]. Like, I think that improv is Meisner but we don't know our lines. Like, in Meisner, if I know the lines, how you say the line to me should affect how I respond. So in improv, when I don't know the lines, everything you say should affect me. So I was already sort of, like, keyed into that. And then Spolin, like...like the short-form skill games, building ensemble, that patience of play...like, the roots of that are in social change. She was trying to acculturate non-English speaking—the children of immigrants—and that's something I love to say when I teach, like “these games we're about to play were meant for non-English speaking kids to do, to kill at, so we should be able to crush it [laughs] as adults.” And that's very—like, to your adult who's just signed up for an improv class—like telling them this is child's play, they're like “Yay, I can do that!” And that's what Paul Sills basically decided—Paul Sills was like, what would happen if me and my adult friends tried to play these games like children? Fearlessly, like children, but bring to it our adult intellect, reference level and emotional depth. Play



like kids, but with all the shit we know as adults. And the byproduct of that was satire. Right?

**AG:** Absolutely.

**RM:** Because of who they were, plus it was adults playing kids games so that's, like, double primed for satire.

**AG:** Do you find yourself using Spolin in other ways now, teaching adults?

**RM:** In the A-E program we used to absolutely do Spolin. In the Conservatory we're using those games to come up with sketch, now they're more scenic, and I'm in the Advanced Improv Program that's my program, so this is really performance, actor sketch, like basic Spolin like as warm-ups, but not like the crux of what we're teaching. It's more Second City voice by then [in the program] and creating a satirical review, that kind of stuff.

**AG:** Can you comment at all on what exactly makes it good—what lends Spolin to being a good warm-up for more advanced students?

**RM:** She makes you get to something right away. You have to make choices, you have to be in the moment, you have to work as a team, but still, you know, sparkle as an individual.

**AG:** OK, so changing gears a little bit. Could you talk about what your perspective is on the purpose of Second City, as it exists right now. Where does it fit, what's its job in terms of serving students or creating art.

**RM:** [Laughs] So, when America is, like fucked, which we are right now.

**AG:** [Laughs] Yeah.

**RM:** Our comedy tends to get kind of weird, and to like distract...like, you know, the role of comedy and satire is to point out foible, hypocrisy, vanity...but, the second part of that definition, which people forget, is to change it. And while you could argue theatre is a vehicle of change, trying to get the audience to suspend their disbelief, I fully believe—and I know, for a fact, because Sheldon [Patinkin] told me—that we were trying to get our audience leaving thinking differently when they left our shows. So, now that America is totally fucked, like, comedy has to become the voice of opposition now, it can't just distract. So, our artistic director Matt Hovde would say that's exactly where we are right now. That our comedy...we're always trying to be subversive, which is weird, because we're the big [theatre] now, but there's still subversion in our satire. Taking on race, politics, like, we're hitting it head on. And I think our job is that...I wouldn't say that we only do satire. Maybe

it's comedy of the shared experience, of the human experience. And remember, in satire there's parody, burlesque, like, all of that stuff is in there. I, I think that we do that, to hold up a magnifying glass to human life, and entertain people, with something that Hovde calls "funny and." Like our job is to be, yes, to entertain you and to be comedic, *but*, just maybe, you left thinking differently about something.

**AG:** That's really wonderful. OK, so you mentioned Sheldon, that's Sheldon Patinkin?

**RM:** Mmhmm.

**AG:** Can you talk a little about him? You knew him?

**RM:** I'm [sic] gonna cry.

**AG:** Is that OK?

**RM:** Sure.

**AG:** I would love to hear about it.

**RM:** So, Sheldon was convinced that I was Jewish [laughs]. Everyone in this building is convinced that I'm Jewish. Maybe its because my name is Rachael and I talk the way I do. Like, I was on this shabbat list, like I always got the high holy days off, which is nice, but I was like alright...[laughs].

**AG:** There are a ton of those, too [laughs].

**RM:** So I got cast in *Jewsical The Musical*, and halfway through the process Sheldon found out I wasn't Jewish. And after shows, during shows, in the program he'd be like "My shiksa!" So, like, he couldn't believe that I wasn't Jewish and like, I had to sing a patter song in Yiddish, but like growing up Italian on Long Island in a very Jewish neighborhood...so, like, we bonded over that. And he loved me and I sassed him and I knew just as much about all kinds of bullshit as he did. So we talked for hours and hours and totally fell in love over our mutual respect for Shakespeare and musicals and theatre and satire, and when I became head of the advanced improv program I was trying to flesh out what our satirical voice was. Like, right after we opened we were called "The Temple of Satire," and I basically was like, "Sheldon, did we know we were doing that?" and he was like "Fuck year, absolutely we did." We were counter-culture. We were trying to fuck with our audience and make them think about their world. But, we were going to do it in a way that showed off our skill and our reference level and intelligence, and how brilliant and funny we were. And, you know, we're still in love, even though he's in heaven. He's looking down on me.

**AG:** Absolutely.

**RM:** And whenever I had a panel, whenever I needed a guest speaker, whenever I was like, “here’s an old black and white picture, who the fuck is in that picture?” Sheldon knew. He knew the name of the *scene* that they were in, that the picture was from, *and* the show. So he was an invaluable resource to me. Norm and I talk often about who’s that guy now...who’s going to keep that oral tradition alive. And its probably Norm now [laughs] and I’m a nerd, but I’m not as good as Sheldon.

**AG:** Did he—do you remember him commenting at all on Spolin or on The Compass Players?

**RM:** We talked about The Compass Players. We didn’t really talk about Spolin...like, everything we were doing was way past that. Review, sketch, actor stuff.

**AG:** Can you talk a little bit more about that? Can you recall anything?

**RM:** Well, we talked about how the shape of shows is different now because culture, society, TV looks different now. We talked about how the shape of a performer is different now, a cast is different now. Even the taboo subject matter...like, Second City was like...“fuck” was said for the first time ever [on a stage] in a very big way on this stage. Lenny Bruce was famously arrested in Chicago at the Gate of Horn for obscenity, and that night the Second City cast...one cast member comes out and another cast member is on the other side of the stage, and one cast member goes “Did you hear? Lenny Bruce got arrested for obscenity,” and the rest of the cast goes—oh, it was “shit,”—everybody goes “No shit!” Right? Not even “fuck.” Like, I’m taking for granted that they could say “fuck” back then. They couldn’t, it was just “shit.” [Laughs]. But that was huge. And that was us being real smart and real stupid at the same time. And Sheldon loved to talk about those moments like that. He sparingly talks about Del Close. They had a very bizarre relationship. They were different species in the same tribe. And, he even will give to Del that—that’s what it was! Del was the first person to say “fuck.” When Kennedy died, somebody gave a suggestion of “grassy knoll” and Sheldon talks about how Del was like “What the fuck do you want to see? What do you want us to do with that, sir?” and how that was totally breaking form, but vastly important that it happened. That you didn’t have to take that suggestion, that you didn’t have to do the first thing you heard, that you could read the room and understand that that’s what nobody needed to see. We frequently talked about how you generated content, and how the cast generated the content, and this cast might be silly, this cast might be smart, this cast might be referential and heady. And he saw every show. He saw every show. So he was, like, he could see the trends in our comedy, what we were doing.

**AG:** I really like those examples, of swearing onstage. Can you think of any other examples of big, paramount moments for Second City? Really important sketches or anything else that seemed sort of crucial that happened onstage as a turning point for theatre or just for Second City.

**RM:** So, we were called the Temple of Satire almost immediately. Like, 1959 we were called the Temple of Satire. And, right around 2001, I don't know if you know what happened in 2001.

**AG:** Mmmhmm.

**RM:** The *New York Times* printed an article that said satire was dead. And, you know, 9/11 rocked everybody's world. We had shows going up, and basically everyone went dark. I personally was on a military base doing a USO show when 9/11 happened, so, we were like having to do a show for an audience holding live firearms, it was a whole fucking weird thing. But when we got back, nobody knew what to do. And, don't know if it was Sheldon or Kelly, but they got Harold Ramis to come back and talk about comedy—and its all the cast, all the touring company, Mainstage, ETC—everyone's sitting in the mainstage together and we're sitting there like, satire is dead, nothing is funny, nobody felt like joking, everyone knows a New Yorker, or was affected by this. And Andy Cobb raises his hand and goes "What the fuck are we supposed to do now, since 9/11?" and Harold Ramis kind of reeled back and went like this [crosses her arms] and said "The same thing we did after MLK, RFK and JFK." And everyone in the room went "Oh." Oh, right? Like, that we had to look back to move forward is kind of amazing. I remember everyone in that room going "We can make comedy! We can do it!" That was a social and political 9/11, not to mention—like, as opposed to the brutal...towers going down—but losing those three world leaders at the same time and knowing that comedy continued after that...we were like "Fuck yeah." So, our next show was called *Thank Heaven it Wasn't 7-11*, and *The Yellow Cab of Courage*, and it starred Keegan [Michael Key] as a cab driver, and like all of a sudden we were getting political and visceral and casts were like...weren't afraid anymore to make shit happen. For me personally, like, it wasn't a sketch or a scene but it was a moment in this building that like, protected—shit, its why we're still doing this today, why we didn't give up and try something different after 9/11.

**AG:** That seems really connected to me, too, the kind of work that was going on at Hull House.

**RM:** Deal with tragedy, let's deal with human experience and pour it into our work. Or at least these fun games, that we're doing, which were really meant to open these children up, expose them to the world.

**AG:** That's what's most interesting to me at the moment is comparing the work being done at Second City to the work that was done at Hull House.

**RM:** Well, it's vastly different, but absolutely rooted in it. Take risks, don't judge yourself, yes and, build on the last thing. That's still it.

**AG:** I know that you in particular—I heard you give a talk, several months ago, about the history of satire, and you had training center students come in and do archival scenes. I really enjoyed that. I know you have a lot of knowledge, can you talk a little about the history of satire? That's a broad question.

**RM:** Oh my God. Well, so, you can theorize that satire has existed as long as language has existed, that somebody was like pointing out someone else's silliness. But it's really like with the advent of the printing press that you can chart its growth. And there's cuneiform and hieroglyphic satire, the satire of the trades is one of the earliest known satires, its Egyptian. I want to say its like 4<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. And you know, leaping forward to the Greeks and all their different kinds of—Romans—and Menippean and all their different kinds. Oh God...the three different kinds of satire, I'm blanking right now. Oh, what's the one that sounds like immature or sophomoric or whatever...which is where the expression comes from. And then from French farce to Charlie Chaplain like, like, whenever anyone dared to take on the establishment, dared to take on...from, from *Gulliver's Travels* satirizing the travel journal, that's what he was trying to do, satirize the travel journal, which was the mode of the time. He was like, I'll give you a fucking travel journal, right? And then, you know, to, to *Key and Peele*, jumping all the way forward to *Key and Peele*, satirizing ESPN—I love when they satirize college sports and ESPN, and like ridiculous coaches' names and plays and sports attitudes. When they take on men versus women, in their very first episode when they had to be like [whispers] "bitch," like they wanted to say "bitches" but they had to be like [whispers] "bitch." So, to me, the device satire, especially with the printing press, it largely started as pictures. Like, from the Egyptians to European political cartoons, because you had to—a picture is worth a thousand words, right? And it transcends languages, like somebody in France could get the same cartoon that somebody in England was passing around, right? So, frequently, like, who is it? Henry the Eighth and Thomas Aquinas were in a flame war with pictures of each other, back and forth as pigs and horn-tooting jesters—right? Burn. To modern day political cartoons. To what's going on in Paris right now. Or even, like, you know I still think of *Doonesbury*, like when I think of *Doonesbury*...and then, sort of that idea of like, and now I'm jumping back.

**AG:** That's fine.

**RM:** Of like Benjamin Franklin using those cartoons and then adding witticisms in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, so sort of like, the new of the day plus the funny thing about the news of the day. Which is what I think Rachel Maddow and Jon Stewart are

doing. Although Jon Stewart would say “I’m doing comedy, I am, yes, using comedy to point out what funny and interesting about the news, but its comedy.” And Rachel Maddow would say she’s doing news, like she’s accountable for facts and news. But she’s still using what is funny and interesting about the news. Like she’ll be the one who will be like [in a silly voice] “There was a vote today,” and you’re like “Yay! Yeah, lady, let’s satirize Congress.” So, satire, so, like, burlesque. Burlesque means to ridicule...what’s the one that I love? It’s a French one. Vaudeville. Roughly translates into “voice of the people.” Those both fall under the definition of satire. So it seems to me that satire is always like, what the people know, but like, only the artists are brave enough to say.

**AG:** I’m jumping all over my questions here.

**RM:** That’s OK, so am I. Oh, so then you move ahead into very pointed political satire. Like, Bill Marr has been on the air for 15 years screaming about Rush Limbaugh, or Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, people who are directly ranting and railing against the system. Right? And then, for some reason, like, music makes it more tolerable. So you get the Tom Lehrers, and the Mark Russells, and the Capitol Steps-es.

**AG:** So, how do you walk that line, between—

**RM:** Oh! I’m interrupting you!

**AG:** Go ahead!

**RM:** The most important scene I think in the last decade, or more, in my experience, a scene that encapsulates it, is “Pogues” by Katie Rich. Katie Rich is the one who was just hired to SNL, it’s the one where a woman comes out and its like [singing] “in the year nineteen-something in the county of Cook, a baby was born and takes her first look.”

**AG:** Oh, the song! And it’s the song about a book having a smell, right?

**RM:** Yes, its about books having a smell and [singing] “the pronoun of this song would have to be he.” Right? That broad for me, said everything I had ever wanted to say, in one song at the end of a Second City show.

**AG:** I think you played that at your talk.

**RM:** Hell yes.

**AG:** And I got to see it. I enjoyed it a lot.

**RM:** It's my favorite scene ever. It's so satirical and so pointed in its view. Oh, I love her. And she's so smart, too.

**AG:** But it's also really funny. How do you walk that line...

**RM:** Yeah, nobody writes checks anymore, right? [laughs]. I mean, I don't think you think about the line. Until somebody tells you—until your producer tells you about it. We write from a place of abundance, we write it all. We throw how we feel at the stage, and then we refine it into something that an audience would love to see. It's not just us putting up how we feel. We are always acknowledging that this is a show, and we don't want the joke to be on our audience. We want them to be in on it. But like, a place like *The Annoyance*, they're thrilled if someone leaves horrified. Hell, even here we frame our hate mail, right? But I don't think we're trying to alienate our audience.

**AG:** Yeah. That's probably a good idea.

**RM:** It's not just art for art's sake. Satire is socially responsible, we got to change it to.

**AG:** What do you think is the role, then, of actual drama? Like, having those serious, grounded scenes in the middle of a string of fart jokes or something?

**RM:** I think like an oil painting—like, an oil painter knows that you lay down the dark first, so that when you put on the white it gives it depth. So, like even—this is dating myself, but—a record album has fast songs, happy songs, slow song, sad songs, long songs, short songs. Our scenes couldn't just be three minutes, laughs per minute, three minutes, laughs per minute, three minutes, laughs per minute. They have to be sad and sweet and funny *and*. Funny and sweet, funny and sad, funny and gross, funny and smart, funny and mean. We have to have all of those in a show for it to have depth, for it to reach everyone in the audience.

**AG:** I appreciate that. So, jumping back a bit...

**RM:** Norm is gonna say I'm a total liar and an idiot.

**AG:** He'll have his time in a minute. [Laughs].

**RM:** [Laughs] He's gonna be like "what was she talking about?"

**AG:** He doesn't have to see this, it's fine. Could you comment at all on how Second City's work has changed over the years, like what the progression has been?

**RM:** Well improv is changing. Like, it's moved from games-based to like, organic, scenic. Culturally as a country, as a world, we've had different things happen to us, right? It's no longer five white dudes onstage anymore, it's women, its different ethnicities, sexual orientations, we've gotta look like what modern looks like. We're always trying to grow and evolve. So, like, basic changes, back in the fifties a scene could be 20 minutes long. Now, if a scene goes longer than three and a half minutes you can hear the audience, like, shifting in their seat. But the human attention span has shortened, so that's what happened.

**AG:** Do you feel like audiences have changed?

**RM:** Not our audiences. Like, it's still...well, people don't wear suits to the theatre anymore. Right?

**AG:** How would you describe a Second City audience? Like, an audience to see the Mainstage.

**RM:** Well I would say that the Mainstage is tourists and the ETC is locals. [Laughs]. But both of them are improv savvy, they're educated, they understand this is made up or this is sketch, they understand this is satire. You know, they're educated, too. That's why they're here. Del Close used to say to assume that the audience is just as smart or smarter than you, because they're observing the painting, they can see connections that you couldn't because you're in the painting. But I'm also a Shakespearian studies major so I understand that Shakespeare hates the mob, so it would be easy for me to say like [using a silly voice] "rich white people who don't give a fuck" but that's not what really who they are. We have a diverse audience who are seeking—I'm getting so stupid right now—I think there's a fallacy that people come to the theatre to escape their own lives. I don't think that's true. I think they go to investigate their own lives further. And since we are literally holding up a magnifying glass to human experience by doing satire, I think our audiences know that that's gonna happen, and they want that.

**AG:** So would you say that an audience at a satirical show—consciously going to see a satirical show—like, that's an act of bravery?

**RM:** [laughing] I think leaving your house in this day and age is an act of bravery.

**AG:** That's fair.

**RM:** I think anytime you support the arts, anytime you buy a ticket to a show, that's brave.

**AG:** OK, I'm going to jump again. Can you comment at all on the connection between improvisation and teaching? Have you noticed that at all?



**RM:** Well the best stand-up knows that you gotta change your running order if its not working. So when I'm teaching I'm not holding to a curriculum, if a class isn't getting it. [Waving to a person walking by] Hello! [Laughs] I will improvise my running order, I will improvise my...move the exercises around so that I can do what the class needs me to do, rather than just what I set out for the day.

**AG:** I know that Second City has some professional development classes for teachers, can you comment at all on that? Are you familiar?

**RM:** It's a wonderful thing, like, you know if you teach something and a class comes up that would help you do your job better, Second City will let you go and do that class, which is wonderful. If I had the time to do it [laughs].

**AG:** I also know Second City does improv classes for people with anxiety and people with Autism.

**RM:** We have improv for ASD, and improv for anxiety. And we sort of realized that because the first improv anxiety had a lot of [sic] ASD people in it, and we sort of realized that was a different skill set. Right? Because even somebody who's just socially awkward—making eye contact isn't the deal it is for somebody on ASD. And that is something, like, that you and I are taking for granted right now that we can do this, so, like, improv for social change—we always say improv changes lives, this *really* does. It really is changing their live. Like, watching a kid on the spectrum fight it, and be able to make eye contact, watching a kid on the spectrum be able to release control and move on to the next thing when a bell rings, watching a kid on the spectrum just stand onstage and do their final show, or somebody with anxiety intro their final show, is...it's the fucking best thing ever as a teacher. It, like, makes it all worth it. Shit, more importantly, improv for social change—I taught workshops at Gilda's Club, to like, women sitting there holding their chemo. And you're just having them play the alphabet game—you know, starting every sentence—and for a second these women have their eyes closed and they're laughing, and you know they're not thinking about anything but which letter comes next. Even if its just for a second. And having lost my mom to breast cancer, I was like, I will teach Gilda's Club classes even if it kills me. I want to do it!

**AG:** They've got you for the rest of your life.

**RM:** [Laughs] Absolutely. In fact, I just did a show for Gilda's Club over at the Park West, and we interviewed some people, like local celebrities, and one of the women we interviewed just signed up for Second City classes just because she had so much fun that night.

**AG:** That's wonderful!

**RM:** We got her. She's fucking hilarious, too.

**AG:** That's wonderful.

**RM:** I want to say she's like a host on WGN in the morning or something, and I was like girl you don't need us! You're hilarious.

**AG:** Well, that's interesting, too. It seems like Second City attracts a really diverse set of students.

**RM:** So A-E there's no audition, and people are sort of looking to see what it is, A-E. Then, maybe you got the bug or maybe you came out of a community theatre or you're a working actor or you have a college degree, then we have sort of a more professional track, which is the Conservatory, Norm's program. That's people who want to be on a stage and people who want to be on SNL or be a writer or a director some day. Then there's my program, the advanced program, like, I know I'm in this. Teach me to be a better actor and a better performer, I know my history I know my comedy. Right? And, sure, within that there's a full spectrum of freaks and weirdos, but we are a very loving, accepting tribe of freaks and weirdos. It certainly, like—yeah, the guy who thinks he's funny in the office, the standup who's wearing suspenders...

**AG:** I know that guy.

**RM:** The housewife who's just having fun. But, the Broadway actor who wants to be better improvisational. We have the MFA student who wants to learn how to use improv for acting—like everybody. Luckily we do it all for them. Long-form, short-form, writing, dance, movement, stage combat, standup. It's all in house, and all in that sort of socially responsible satirical bent. Which is hot.

**AG:** Can you comment a little but on—what is the role of play within all of these classes? Within improvisation or even within writing classes.

**RM:** Well, that's it. Fear and judgment is the enemy of play, and we want to be children and play for three hours every week. And from that fearlessness we will generate content, and from that content we will get a satirical show. If we don't play nicely together, we have nothing. Nobody knows that's gonna happen, it's improv, right? So if we don't set some ground rules and play like friends, and lovers, there's no fucking point.

**AG:** That makes sense. So, if you're talking to a lay person who's going to go watch an archived show, what are maybe your top five archival shows that people have to see to get a picture of Second City?

**RM:** *South Side of Heaven*, *Pinata Full of Bees*, *Paradigm Lost*, *Yellow Cab of Courage*, and then I like to go back. *Old Wine In New Bottles* is like an archival show, its like a midcentury of all the early stuff. So its got all the good stuff but in one show. And then any of Norm's shows—I don't know how they let Norm get away with what he did, like *Baby Richard's Got Back*—Like, Norm's shows...we haven't done anything like that before or after. They let Norm do whatever the fuck he wanted.

**AG:** How would you characterize those shows?

**RM:** They were insane. Like, they sent a cast member naked out into the house to beg for clothes.

**AG:** So just more shocking stuff.

**RM:** Well the ETC was always allowed to take more risks than the Mainstage. I don't know why. Maybe for that thing I nodded to before—that's unofficial, that's my assessment—that tourists see Mainstage and locals go to the ETC. Something about the difference between the rooms, like ETC was always a little more weird. So, he got to get real weird.

**AG:** Side note, *South Side of Heaven* is the first Second City show I ever saw and its what made me want to move here.

**RM:** Its amazing. Its amazing.

**AG:** Can you sort of describe what makes those shows special?

**RM:** The right combination of cast, the right combination of ideologies, the right director, the right social climate happening outside the building, you know...zeitgeist, that's all it is.

**AG:** What makes a good director for Second City? I would imagine it takes a pretty special type of human.

**RM:** Someone who has their own point of view, someone who knows how they feel about the world, but can, can bring out the best of their cast's point of view, and get that to work in symphony. So, its not just their point of view, but letting the cast—somebody who can be the conductor to this incredibly talented orchestra. And then, somebody who, you know because we're all actors, someone who's, who rehearses, who edits, who...who, like you could just put up a show, but who puts up a *show*. That's a weird way to say it.

**AG:** No, that makes sense. Can you comment at all on what sorts of steps Second City takes to maintain or preserve a connection to its historical roots?

**RM:** That's amazing because we have been talking about that. I mean, clearly, if you look at the walls, we celebrate our founders. We celebrate our cast, there's pictures of our alumni everywhere, there's lists of our famous cast members everywhere. Every theatre is named after someone we loved who passed away. That's Donny Depaulo's Skybox, the Martin DeMaat theatre, the Mary Scruggs room right over there [motions toward a classroom]. We're going to get the Harold Ramis screening room, and a Sheldon Patinkin bar and lounge. We know we are standing on the shoulders of giants, just like they knew they were standing on the shoulders of giants. Whether it was Brecht or Aristophanes, like, we know that what we do is steeped in tradition, and it is very important for us to keep that alive. Shit, any time you stand on that stage its like, fucking, John Belushi stood here. Stood *here*. And that's not to toot our own horn, that's like—because they wanted to be here.

**AG:** Well, I've danced all around my questions, and this will be read by all of about seven people, so for posterity [laughs] is there anything else you would like to comment on about Second City or your time here?

**RM:** There is a mural downstairs in the Up Conference room, you should go look at it. Go in and ask the receptionist if you can look at it, in the Up Conference Room, and you'll see a little bubble that says "Second City," and off of it you will see eight hundred million bubbles, of where everyone who's ever done anything has gone off too—the TV, the film, the directing, the writing, the politics, Twitter. Right? The CEO of Twitter started at The Annoyance. I remember seeing him in a show there. A science show because he was a nerd.

**AG:** Of course.

**RM:** That we have...we have...like, not to mention we're the triple A for SNL. We have alumni in almost every aspect of human life out there. Our work is ground breaking, and continues to be the warehouse that produces performers. What we do is...we're still doing something right. People acknowledge. Look at our corporate side—we had no corporate side, except like let's do some shows—and now we teach improv pedagogy to business people. Like, people know that "yes, and" means something and could change all of our lives. Martin DeMaat used to say that we're not just teaching them to be better improvisers we're teaching them to be better people. No one likes to be told "no" or to be judged openly, or shit on. So those are—the opposite of those things are the rules of improvisation. And I think that is why Second City is still a beacon for people to come to. We care about our content, we care about what we do, we prepare you to go out and be successful in the world, whether it's a television writer or a parent.

**AG:** Can you talk more about Second City's relationship with SNL?

**RM:** They come in twice a year. I would say that The Groundlings, and The Second City, and the UCB are where SNL goes every year to look for new talent. I mean every year four or five people from here get hired. That's big. And there's usually two ways they come in—one is like a private audition, where they come in and they already have a list of who they want to see. Its usually the Mainstage and ETC. But then there's an open audition, which is like, "show us your ten best people," which means you already have to be at like a certain level. To get on that list. But they don't only come here, they go to Annoyance, too—I think Mick sets up a show. I think iO does a showcase. Like, Chicago is Mecca as far as this work is concerned.

**AG:** How do you perceive that relationship between Second City and SNL?

**RM:** Its good for everybody. In fact at SNL there's sort of the Ivy League camp, and the UCB people, and the Chicago people, and the Groundlings people. And the UCB and Chicago people are all sort of born from the same mother, so you have the Lampoon kids and the Chicago kids and the Groundlinds kids, and you all get sort of paired with somebody else, to write with other people. And its our people who can write with anybody, because of that "yes, and" thing. Whereas another writer who's used to writing in a bubble might not be able to do that. I think this art by ensemble, art by concession, it makes for great things—bigger than you could do alone, but for which everyone is accountable. And then you go off into the world just wanting to do more good art. We're like, I would say, we're like the Triple A, the minor leagues for SNL. Its fucking awesome.

**AG:** It is awesome. I've exhausted my questions, thank you so much for your time.

**RM:** My pleasure.

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## VITA

Ann Goodson was raised in Manhattan, Kansas. In 2011 she graduated from Kansas State University with a B.S. in Secondary Education for Speech and Theatre. Following graduation she moved to Chicago to study at Loyola University Chicago. During her time at Loyola she has simultaneously continued her training in theatre and writing, and has graduated from The Second City's Conservatory and Writing Program and the iO Theatre's Improvisation Program.



